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Journey now, dear reader, to the penultimate age of Old Earth, an eon before Jack Vance's Dying Earth. Here we encounter a time when all has been mapped and everything is known.

Now consider the Commons, the collective unconscious wherein all our dreams are made manifest. Brave are the noönauts who venture into this realm.

Yes folks, we have here a new tale of Guth Bandar (last seen in our Oct/Nov. 2005 issue). This story flashes back to Bandar's younger days and suggests that perhaps there is something new under the sun.

A Herd of Opportunity

By Matthew Hughes

“**S**AY NOTHING. I SHALL DO all the talking,” Preceptor Huffley had whispered to Guth Bandar as they’d entered the low-ceilinged stone hut. So

now the young student sat on the hard wooden chair near the door, hands neatly folded, as his elderly teacher chaffered with the Eminence Malabar, the white-bearded ascetic who was head of this cloistered settlement.

“How will you proceed?” said the Eminence.

Huffley’s hand idly stirred the air. “Oh, the usual approach. Assess the elements, delineate the parameters, identify the paradigm, adjust the interactions.”

The patriarch’s brow creased. “We did not pay an exorbitant cost to bring you and your assistant all the way from Old Earth for assessments and delineations,” he said. “Action is required, preferably vigorous, decisive and prompt. Our reflections will suffer as long as that intolerable racket continues.”

“Indeed,” said the preceptor. “Then we had best be about it.”

“I will show you,” said the patriarch.

He led the way out of the hut and across the Sequestrance. Bandar followed his teacher, his eyes taking in the details of the place. They crossed a central open space floored in swept hardpan and surrounded by neat rows of domed, windowless huts built of the ubiquitous dun-colored stone that, along with pebbles and grit, comprised all that Bandar had yet seen of this remote and lightly settled world called Gamza they had traveled halfway down The Spray to reach. A larger dome stood on the far side of the square, low roofed but roomy enough to hold all of the settlement. Bandar glanced within its broad, arched entrance and saw that the bare floor was covered with rows of wide, flat bowls of polished wood, with a woven meditation mat beside each bowl.

To his right, dozens of robed and sandaled men labored in the garden to coax straggling rows of legumes from the uncooperative soil, while others pumped water from a central well and carried it by yoke-borne buckets to irrigate the furrows. The high white sun directly overhead must steam the moisture from the dirt almost as soon as it was delivered, Bandar thought, feeling rivulets of sweat trickle down his back and chest under his two-piece traveling suit.

Their path angled away from the main building and Bandar surmised that they were heading for the Sequestrance's encircling wall — or not quite encircling, he noticed. The barrier, three times as high as Bandar was tall, was still under construction, although it must soon be finished. In the gap he saw two other crews working quickly: one group used a fragmenter to break bedrock into manageable chunks, while the other stacked the pieces to shape the wall. A brawny man with a shoulder-slung aggregator then melded the serried rocks into a smoothness.

None paused to watch their patriarch and the two strangers make their way across the square, passing the self-guided carryall that had collected Huffley and Bandar from the minimalist spaceport — two unserviced pads and a rough shed — where the freighter *Abron* had touched down and deposited them on the world's single continent. The carryall's prime mission had been to collect several heavy crates whose clanking contents Bandar had assumed to be agricultural tools. The preceptor and student had had to sit atop the cargo for the short flight across level desert to the Sequestrance, their teeth set on edge by the

whine of its untuned gravity obviators. Bandar noted that no one was bothering to unload the vehicle.

At the path's end they found a set of steps and climbed to a landing that ran the full length of the south wall. Here the patriarch struck a pose and gestured with an outflung arm. "Thus the foul stain brought by Rul Bazwan," he said, pronouncing the name as if it generated an unappetizing taste.

Encompassed by the sweep of Malabar's arm was a sight that Bandar found to be at sharp variance with the austere simplicity of the Sequestrance. Below the wall was a gentle slope, from the base of which a ramshackle sprawl of tents and mobile caravans rambled off to the south. Costumes and accents of several worlds met Bandar's eyes and ears as he looked down on the throngs bustling along the narrow, twisting ways and passing in and out of the flimsy buildings.

At the far edge of the shantytown a more substantial edifice was under construction. Workers were assembling prefabricated components into the second story of the Hotel Splendor — so the sign above the building's verandah boasted. The first story was already in full operation as a saloon, judging from the trio of inebriates Bandar saw emerge from its swinging doors, supporting each other as they staggered a short distance to the next establishment, a multi-poled tent whose wooden marquee featured a garish painting of two naked women holding a sign that read: THE PLEASURE GARDEN.

Now Bandar saw a balloon-tired, open-topped charabanc draw up outside the Splendor. Its rows of seats were quickly filled by folk, mostly men but with a smattering of women, who had been waiting on the front porch. They chattered animatedly as the vehicle pulled away and headed south toward a range of low hills.

"Intolerable!" said Malabar.

"Indeed," said Huffley. "Quite beyond endurance."

"And you can undo this? We must have peace for our reflections."

Huffley's hand again gave its insouciant wave. "I foresee no problems."

Bandar blinked in surprise, unaware of any expertise the preceptor might have acquired in the art of slum clearance. Immediately, he knew his face had betrayed his reaction because he saw the patriarch's glance

touch him, then swing back to Huffley for an incisive examination of the academician's bland countenance. "You have indeed done this before?" Malabar said. "Your message implied wide experience and an almost facile competence."

"Times without number," said Huffley. "Institute scholars are frequently called in to handle these little matters. In fact, unless there's more you need tell us, we shall set to."

Suspicion lingered in Malabar's downdrawn brows and lips, but he said, "It is time for the noon reflections. Go to your work. But hurry! The disturbance bars us from the ineffable. We will not stand for it." He threw the shantytown a final glare and descended the steps.

"Master," said Bandar, "what have you told these people?"

"You need not be concerned," was the preceptor's reply.

Bandar was prepared to argue, though it was a rare student of the Institute of Historical Inquiry who would even voice a question to a senior fellow like Preceptor Huffley, let alone challenge him. But the young man had been conscious of a growing apprehension ever since they had arrived at the Sequestrance. "The Eminence holds a vast anger that strains a thin leash," he said. "I doubt he responds well to disappointment."

Huffley's face stiffened. "It is not a student's place...", he began, but was cut off by the clanging of metal on metal. Bandar turned and saw a man standing in the center of the central square, beating with a bar of black iron on a circle of the same metal suspended from a wooden frame. Across the Sequestrance, all of the robed men stopped what they had been doing and converged on the main building, many of them pausing at the well to dip a ladle into a water barrel and drink deep.

"Come," said Huffley. "While they're occupied."

He led the way to the gap where the wall was nearing completion. Bandar noticed that there was no gate, nor any timbers from which one might be fashioned, and told his teacher that the absence seemed peculiar.

"These people are, by definition, peculiar," Huffley said. "They would not otherwise have secluded themselves out in the desert on an unfashionable and barely habitable world."

They passed through the gap and followed the west wall until they came to a path that led down into the other settlement. Huffley continued to discourse on the people who had paid their way to Gamza. Bandar

suspected his attention was being diverted from his earlier question, but he listened with at least a show of the polite deference expected of a student of the Institute.

"Malabar heads a sect that has broken away from the Revered Society of Hydromants on Ballyanhowe," the preceptor said.

Bandar was familiar with both the cult and the world. Ballyanhowe was one of the Fundamental Domains, settled long ago during the great effloration from Old Earth that ended humanity's infancy. It was an old world now: rich, mellowed, and given over to the esoteric pursuits devised by peoples whose wants were won without toil. Hydromancy was an ancient art occasionally revived among such leisured populations. Its practitioners gazed into pools of standing liquid, usually purified water but sometimes oils or natural essences, seeking a deeper acquaintance with the universe that lay without or within.

"The Eminence was dissatisfied with the practices of the Revered Society," Huffley said. "He experienced an inspiration that insights are more penetrating if the contemplated liquid 'originates within the seeker,' as he put it."

"You mean they're all sitting there staring into reeking bowls of their own...."

"Who are we to quibble with another's inspiration?" Huffley said. They had reached the bottom of the slope. The scholar chose an alleyway and set off toward the hotel, whose upper story was visible beyond the sprawl of tents and towables.

He continued as they walked, dodging other pedestrians and ignoring explicit offers of personal services from men and women standing in doorways. "Malabar's innovations were generally not well received. A few of the younger hydromants sided with him but their attempts to practice the new dispensation in the Grand Tabernacle met resistance. When he would not compromise, the disaffection of the majority was inflamed into an outright hostility that Malabar's followers returned redoubled. Harsh words were thrown about, then — as is not unknown in such disputes — a few bricks and stones. He and his adherents thought it prudent to withdraw. They pooled their wealth and bought passage to this barren spot. They dug a well and created the Sequestrance, to follow their inclinations undisturbed."

Huffley looked about, saw no obvious eavesdroppers, then continued, "Then the Bololos arrived."

"The Bololos?" said Bandar. "Are they this rabble that infests the shantytown?"

"No, they are the cause that brought the rabble here. They are the autochthones of Gamza, a large but harmless quasi-sapient species of lichen grazers. Yet they are 'fundamental to the nuisance,' or so Malabar described them in his missive accepting my offer to resolve the problem."

"Master, I did not know that you were versed in conflict resolution."

Huffley looked slightly abashed. "In truth, it is not among my accomplishments."

"Perhaps you should fall back a step or two and explain how you came to make such an offer."

"The Bololos are telepaths," the academician said, "but otherwise devoid of interest. They have no discernible culture, no arts or quaint customs, no wars or religious enthusiasms. In the literature, they are described as an entirely happy and entirely boring population who pass their uneventful lives in calm, unbroken communion with each other. They follow an annual round of wandering from one oasis of desert vegetation to another, spending the days grazing except when they pause briefly to create more Bololos. Even that process is said to be sedate."

Bandar was puzzled. "Yet people have come all this way to watch them graze?"

Huffley signaled a negative. "Since Malabar's hydromants settled close to one of the grazing areas, the telepaths have exhibited unusual behavior. They strike poses or run about. One will suddenly embrace another, receiving in return a welcome or a buffet to the midriff. It is all rather harmless, since they are completely unequipped to do each other real damage. Though they are strong, in their way, there is neither a fang nor a claw amongst the lot of them."

The phenomenon only occurred while the Bololos were within close range of the hydromants, Huffley explained. Once they had eaten all the season's crop of vetch or whatever it was they craved, they would move on. As soon as they put distance between themselves and the Sequestrance, the odd behavior stopped.

Bandar had been conscious of a growing excitement as the preceptor

spoke. "Master," he said, "you are saying that a cross-species transference has occurred."

"I am not saying it quite yet," said Huffley. His front teeth chewed nervously at his lips for a moment before he continued. "I am saying that there are definite indications. We are here to observe and draw conclusions."

"It's unheard of," Bandar said. "It would be," — he swallowed, throat suddenly dry — "a new datum."

Huffley's face twitched. The old man seemed torn between joyous excitement and stark terror and Bandar thought the mix appropriate to the situation. No one had contributed a new datum to the Institute's vast compendium of knowledge since time immemorial.

The two scholars had stopped to contemplate the enormity of the prospect. Now a rotund man, who wore a remarkable hat and smelled strongly of the devastating liquor known as Red Abandon, stumbled into them and caromed away. They resumed their progress toward the Hotel Splendor.

"So we are not here to solve the hydromants' problem, though it was that expectation that led them to pay our passage?"

"The search for knowledge sometimes requires a scholar to make bold leaps," said Huffley. "Do you imagine the first explorers of the Commons paused to quibble and cavil over every little detail?"

"I imagine they risked their own identities, not the wealth of others," said Bandar.

The preceptor threw his student a look that carried unmixed sentiments and Bandar subsided. Instead he indicated the shambles around them and said, "How did all this arrive?"

Huffley told him that after the Bololos had come and gone three years running, news of their odd antics reached the distant mining town of Haplick where a boom built around the discovery of surface deposits of odlerite was beginning to fade. The impresario Rul Bazwan, a man as long on enterprise as he was short on qualms, operated there, supplying miners with the services they craved in their off-time: ardent liquors, games of chance, and compliant companions. His receipts beginning to decline, Bazwan was casting about for a new place in which to pitch up, and fearing that he would be put to the expense of moving his troupe offworld. Then the Bololos offered opportunity.

"He sent men to harvest lichens at the next point on the creatures' migratory circuit, delivering the stuff to feeding stations he established in a natural amphitheater not far from here. The Bololos, their fodder at hand, did not move on. Near the food Bazwan left heaps of costumes and theatrical props. The Bololos, their psyches contaminated by the contents of the human unconscious, took them up and began to act out myths and archetypical situations.

"Bazwan takes tourists out to gawk for free as the poor things strut and fret," Huffley continued. "He profits when the punters return to his establishment for wine, whoopitude, and song. His enterprise is popular among the jaded. They now come here even from other worlds, as do disreputable hangers-on who feed dissolute appetites. A town has sprung up and the noise is a sore trial to the sequestrants."

Huffley's soft hands met and parted in a gesture that expressed resignation at the misfortunes of others. "But it is an unheard of opportunity for two scholars of the Institute."

THE INSTITUTE of Historical Inquiry had been established in the city of Olkney on Old Earth scores, some said hundreds, of thousands of years ago, to explore and map the human collective unconscious. Through a mastery of recondite mentalist techniques, the founding scholars of the Institute had learned to delve beneath their individual, personal unconsciousnesses and enter that vast noösphere resident within all humanity, where resided the eternal archetypes of the species: the Fool and the Hero, the Mother and Father, the Wise Man and the Helpful Beast, the Deliverer and the Devourer, and many more. Here, too, were all the elemental Events, Situations, and Landscapes of the human story: from the Discovery of the New Land to the Invasion of the Barbarians; from the First Kiss of Innocence to the Scorning of the Inamorata; from the Forest of the Beasts to the City of the Machines.

Over thousands of years, the noösphere, colloquially called the Commons, was thoroughly mapped and delineated by resolute explorers. By adapting the lesson of the dawn-time orphic myth of the singer whose songs had kept him safe in the underworld, they discovered that chanting certain sequences of tones — the technical term was thrans — would

allow them to pass safely through the nodes that connected one Location to another. Other thrans could hide the noönauts from the perceptions of the Commons's denizens. The latter ability was important, whether dealing with the general archetypical figures or the idiomatic entities that inhabited specific Locations. Many of these were appallingly violent by their very natures, but any of them could become dangerous if disharmonious elements were added to the stories that were, literally, their existence.

The Commons, then, was the most wonderful, most terrible, of places. Every joy, every horror, was crystallized there, in a realm that was timeless though not boundless; for the early explorers had discovered a barrier — it usually presented itself as an endless chain of mountains, or a topless wall of closely fitted white blocks of stone — between the human noösphere and the collective unconsciousness of any other intelligent species. The wall could be neither breached nor climbed. Nor could it be dug under, for there was nothing below the "ground" of the Commons but the formless gray sea of unsapience through which swam the great blind Worm of preconsciousness, eternally seeking to devour its own tail...or, as one unlucky noönaut pioneer found, anything else that entered the pearly light of its "waters."

None of the few telepathic species that humans had encountered could breach the wall. Thus it was concluded that each Commons must operate on its own unique "frequency," though what these purported frequencies might be had never been conclusively demonstrated. Still, it was accepted that the separation of Commonses, each from all others, was a fundamental underpinning of the universe, like the gravitational constant and the three speeds of light.

Bandar was musing on the import of the Bololos' contamination when the two scholars emerged from an alley directly across from the Hotel Splendor. They crossed the dusty street and mounted the stairs to the verandah, where a mustachioed man in a garishly patterned suit stood behind a lectern on top of which rested a roll of paper tickets. "Next charabanc leaves in twenty minutes," he told the pair as they approached, adding, "No charge."

Huffley took two tickets. He looked about for somewhere to wait out of the sun, but there were no seats outside the establishment.

"Master," Bandar said, "perhaps a cold beer would wash away the iron taste of the water they gave us at the Sequestrance."

The young man noted that his words brought them a sidelong glance from the ticket-seller, but Huffley was already through the hotel's swinging half-doors. Bandar followed him into a large room. A heterogeneous crowd was taking advantage of the availability of food and beverages dispensed from behind a well-polished bar and carried to the dozens of tables by young women wearing uniforms apparently designed to avoid the slightest possibility of confusion over their gender. At the back of the room, spinning wheels, flashing lights, and occasional cries or wails betokened victory or defeat at games of chance.

The Institute men took seats at an empty table and ordered flagons of ale from a passing server whose attributes caused Bandar's eyes to follow her as she departed, until Huffley's booted toe connected with his ankle under the table. Having secured his attention, the academician leaned toward him and said, "We should discuss our program."

Bandar bent to rub his aching joint. "I have yet to hear of any program," he said.

"I detect in your tone a hitherto unsuspected capacity for bitterness," Huffley said. "Perhaps it is the first time I have heard you speak from your heart."

"I am speaking from my ankle," Bandar said, "but that is beside...."

Two flagons of ale arrived on the table at that moment, but when the two disputants looked up they saw not the buxom young woman who had taken the order, but a tall, lean man with a prominent scar across his clean-shaven chin.

"Mind if I join you?" he said but did not wait for an answer before sitting.

"This is a private conversation," Huffley said.

"In my establishment," said the stranger, "all conversations involve me."

"You are Rul Bazwan," Huffley said.

The man inclined his head. "I already know who *I* am," he said. "What interests me is who you are. And specifically how you came to approach my saloon from the direction of the piddlers' palace up there on the hill."

The preceptor drew himself erect in his chair. "We are scholars of the Institute of Historical Inquiry on Old Earth. We are..."

"...on sabbatical," Bandar broke in, "and thought it might be interesting to take in some local sights." He took up his ale and looked around. "Quite a colorful establishment you have here."

Bazwan fixed the young man with a suspicious eye. "And into what, exactly, does your Institute inquire?"

Bandar saw that Huffley was inclined to answer and again leapt in to seize the floor. "Nothing much. Odd little quirks of Old Earth's distant past. For most of us, it's more of a hobby than a profession."

"Now, just a moment..." Huffley began, a reddening flush rising from his collar into his cheeks.

But Bandar cut him off again, both with words and with a kick under the table. "My esteemed colleague, for example, has made a comprehensive study of the pubic hairstyles that were fashionable in the Eighteenth Aeon. His expertise in the matter of braided merkins is unparalleled. I'm sure he'd be delighted to tell you about them."

Bazwan drew back. "That won't be necessary," he said, though mistrust lingered in the crevices about his eyes. "But what were you doing among the piss-pots up above?"

"I don't know whom you mean," Bandar said.

Bazwan's thumb hooked in the direction of the Sequestrance. "The place you came from."

"Oh," said the young man. "We were stranded at some little space port and hitched a ride on their dray. Why do you call them piss-pots? Are they noted for their tipping? By the way, this ale is quite good."

"Never mind," said the innkeeper, rising to his feet. "Enjoy your stay."

When the scarred man was gone, Huffley said, "You assaulted me."

"That is nothing compared to what I suspect Rul Bazwan would do if he thought we were here to interfere with his livelihood."

Comprehension dawned in the academician's face. "Oh," he said, "yes, I see. Good thinking."

"Not that we're actually capable of doing so," Bandar continued, keeping his voice low. "Unless you have powers a mere student cannot guess at."

Huffleby took up his ale. "I have no such powers," he said. "I will ascertain if there is phenomenon of telepathic leakage across species lines. Then I shall declare to the hydromants that the situation is more dire than I had thought, paint the Bololos in the colors of dangerous psychotics, and recommend that the Sequestrance move to another site."

"Malabar will not hear that news gladly." Bandar said.

"What can he do? He is, after all, a contemplative."

"My impression is that he might have no difficulty contemplating murder and mayhem. He did allude to another plan."

"My assessment of him differs," said Huffleby. "They will all probably hide behind their wall, their ears stuffed with that horrid bread they tried to feed us. It would certainly be a better use than eating it." A noise from outside drew his attention. "There is the charabanc. Let us embark."

They took seats in the front row. The vehicle soon filled up with passengers whose costumes, coiffures, and adornments of skin and appendages identified them as having come from at least a dozen worlds. When all the seats were taken the vehicle began to roll forward, then stopped briefly at the call of a muscular young bravo in a wide-brimmed hat and fringed leggings who came out of the saloon and leapt aboard to take a position standing behind the operator.

The high-wheeled conveyance rolled away, flinging dust and grit in billows behind it. Huffleby leaned toward Bandar to say something, but the student signaled his teacher to silence while indicating with an inclination of his head the man standing close to them. The fellow did not look their way, but Bandar had the impression that if his ears could have swiveled in their direction, they would have.

The journey was short, ending at the rim of a shallow depression that formed a natural amphitheater. The charabanc unloaded and the passengers descended to find seats on narrow ledges of rock that sloped down toward a wide and open space. Bandar looked down upon a herd of Bololos.

The creatures stood on their hind legs like humans, freeing their upper appendages to scoop up handfuls of dark lichen from the several piles scattered about the natural basin. This they ate with jaws and dentition that again approximated the human, though to call the entire effect humanoid one would have to stretch the definition to include

beings that were half again as big as Bandar, covered in coarse hair that came in shades from dun to light brown, and with skulls topped by a pronounced cranial ridge that anchored their huge chewing muscles. They also had short, broad and hairless tails that Bandar thought might have something to do with radiating excess body heat.

"Come," said Huffley, and led the way to a seat near the rim of the amphitheater. "We will watch."

The piles of lichen were disappearing at a rapid rate, there being as many as a hundred adult Bololos in the herd, with a scattering of juveniles. "I have read about this," Huffley said. "They will eat until they are sated. When the food is gone, they normally lapse into a state of mutual communion."

The autochthones did not do so, however, because as the last handfuls of lichen were crammed into the gaping maws and chewed to pulp, a flying car came to hover over them. Two men dropped bundles of brightly colored clothing and various objects and implements among the Bololos. The car then sidled over to where the spectators sat and a florid-looking man in spangled garments took up an amplifier.

"Honorable and distinctions," he began, "I invite you to witness a rare incidence of cross-species assonance. But first, I must have your cooperation, for you yourselves are an intrinsic part of this experience."

Some of the audience looked interested, others annoyed at the unexpected prospect of exerting themselves in the pursuit of their own entertainment. The master of ceremonies assumed a mollifying air. "All that is required of you is that you choose," he said, "from among the common pantheon of stories on which the literature of all the many worlds of The Spray is founded. The comic misadventures of *The Three Orlicants*, for example. The rousing saga of *The King in Darkness*. The tragedy of *Heliocanth and Helaphion*."

Each of the titles was advanced with an expansive gesture and roll of the man's eyes. "Choose one," his amplified voice continued. "Let its scenes and motifs well up into your thoughts from the deepest springs, dwell upon its tropes and meanings, and — behold! — the creatures below will assume the principal roles and reenact them before your eyes. The spectacle will delight and astonish by the incongruent juxtaposition of the familiar and the bizarre."

He executed a final flourish and assumed an air of expectation. There was silence from the crowd, then a tentative voice called out, "*The Justification of Ballion!*"

"*The Remarkable Ring!*" cried another.

"No," said a third, more confident voice, "make it *The Lad Who Persevered!*"

At this, there was a general murmur of acceptance from the crowd. The master of ceremonies gave a knowing wink and said, "*The Lad* it shall be." The air car rose slowly as he continued, in a sonorous tone, "Close your eyes, clear the mind. Now, softly, softly, let the first scene of the story rise to fill your inner screen. Do you have it? Can you see the fated child among the tyrant's cabbages? Now, then, open and gaze upon a wonderment!"

Bandar had done as the man had bid. Now, as he beheld the area below, he saw the Bololos bending over the piles of costumes and props, draping themselves in outsized garments and picking up various implements. At first, the scene was random and chaotic, then the elements of the old story suddenly fell into place.

"Look," he said to Huffley, "that one with the hoe is obviously the lad. See, he gouges the soil, now pauses to dream. And, yes, here comes the brutal overseer — there's his whip and there's the shackles — and that light-shaded one must be the child's despairing dam."

"Yes, yes," said the academician. "It is what I expected."

"Now the ones in the background are forming ranks," Bandar said. "They'll be the army. There goes the lad to volunteer. And now the overseer is changing into the abusive sergeant."

"Remarkable, I'm sure," said Huffley. "But let us do what we came to do."

"Which you have not yet vouchsafed to me," said Bandar. "Shall I sit here and guess?"

"You are becoming quite forward for an undergraduate," said Huffley.

"Doubtless it is the broadening effect of off-world travel," said Bandar. "Or perhaps I am so naturally impatient that after spending hardly more than a week traveling halfway down The Spray I begin to require answers."

"And somewhat snippy, to boot," said the preceptor. "You put me in

mind of Fartherthwaith, the Overdean. Still, you cannot do your part unless I acquaint you with it. So pay heed."

Huffley quickly outlined his plan, the elements of which were much as Bandar had expected. Each would descend through his own unconscious into the Commons. They would meet and seek the breach in the wall through which human archetypes were being telepathically drawn into the unconscious of the Bololos.

"I will approach the gap and look through it," Huffley concluded, "while you chant the thran that will keep us unapprehended by the archetypes."

"May I also not look through?" Bandar said.

"You are but in your third year. You would be terrified."

Bandar was indeed apprehensive, yet he hoped he was brave. "But I have come all this way."

"Enough," said Huffley. "We shall begin."

The pair assumed the cross-legged position and prepared to begin the mental exercises that were the first step on the road into the Commons. Before he closed his eyes and drew his focus inward, Bandar looked around. The spectators around them were avidly watching the drama unfolding below, where the Bololos were now enacting the Battle of Millefolle, the military catastrophe from which the plucky boy hero rescues the heir to the kingdom only to see another given the reward. Bandar looked for the man in the hat and leggings, but could not see him.

"I'm concerned about that bravo in the hat and leggings," he said.

"Such men are of no account," Huffley said. "Commence."

Bandar withdrew his attention from the scene, closed his eyes and concentrated on the exercises that prepared him to enter the unconscious. In a few moments he saw the familiar portal: a sealed door that, even as he reified it, began to glow about its edges as if behind it stood a great lamp. Bandar fashioned a mental hand and had it lift the latch, causing the door to swing outward. His whole inner vision was now bathed in a rich light of rosaceous gold. He propelled his consciousness into the warm effulgence and instantly it faded. He was standing in the great storage room behind his Uncle Fley's housewares emporium, the place where he had spent much of his later boyhood. He looked about him and saw, as he knew he would, an item that was inconsistent with the remembered reality from

which this vision was drawn: set in the far wall was a door of dark, close-grained wood with a black iron handle in the shape of a gnarled hand. Fearlessly, Bandar approached the door, seized, and yanked.

Beyond was a darkness in which loomed a shadowy figure. As Bandar stepped forward it also came toward him and resolved itself into the image of someone he knew: Didrick Gabbri, a fellow student at the Institute with a flair for self-aggrandizement and a general approach to life that struck Bandar as a basic meanness of spirit. Bandar knew the dark eidolon was not the real Gabbri, was in fact a projected reification of those negative qualities that Bandar rejected in his own makeup. The figure sneered at Bandar, but the young man simply strode through it and, as his chest made contact, the image vanished like a burst bubble.

Now Bandar stood at the top of a wide curving stairway that descended into mist. He went down swiftly, knowing that Huffley, a master noönaut, must reach the outer circle of the Commons before him and sure that the old man would levy criticism for delaying their work. In a moment the mist evanesced and he was walking down a country lane that led down into a green valley from a gentle hill. On either side, low stone walls separated the road from open fields dotted with copses of trees.

He caught a flicker of light from the corner of one eye, stopped, and turned toward it. The light faded and was replaced by a pale rendition of Huffley. The image quickly darkened and solidified until the academician appeared as solid as Bandar.

"I've been waiting," the senior man said, tapping his foot.

Bandar made an apologetic gesture and the old man sniffed and turned to look down the road. "We will go first to the outer arrondissement and see what the effects are on the pure archetypes." Even as he spoke, he set off down the road, adding, "The situation may be roiled. Begin the three-three-seven."

Bandar began singing the most elemental thran, a sequence that sounded much like an ancient children's song about an old man, a dog, and a bone, among other things. Its notes would prevent them from being apprehended by any archetypes they might encounter. He looked about him and saw nothing but fields and trees, but he knew that neither actually existed and that an attempt to cross the apparent open spaces beyond the walls would soon have him walking into an unseen gate that

would drop him into one of the myriad Locations of the Commons. He kept to the road.

After a few moments, he became aware that the road encountered a deep ravine across which hung a suspension bridge of ropes and planks. Bandar studied the construction with some small interest, knowing that it must be Huffley's conception of the entry into the outer shell of the great sphere that was the Commons. If Bandar had been exerting the primary influence on this exploration, they would have come to a stream overarched by a bridge of dressed stone. Others would have seen a simple fence with a stile, a log over a brook, a high-flying ribbon of bright metal over a bottomless chasm, a city street marked by a crosswalk.

The scene on the far side of the barrier was indistinct, in the manner of dreams, but as they made their way to the midpoint of the span they saw a limitless open space in which a host of figures stood or sat or moved about at random.

"Stop," said Huffley. "But chant louder. I sense a definite tension."

Bandar increased his volume, at the same time using a noñnaut technique that extended and sharpened his vision. He focused on the figures in the field, identifying many of them at first appraisal. Here came the Wise Man, there the female Temptress and the male Seducer. The Fool lolloped by. The Eater of Children stalked past, rubbing its gnarled hands together. Bandar saw the Judge of Souls and the Helpful Beast, and off in the distance he could see the Willing Sacrifice and the Redeemer — all the "usual suspects," as Institute undergraduates were wont to refer to them.

But no, not all of them, he realized as Huffley spoke. "I do not see the Tyrant, nor the Commander, nor the Boy of Destiny. I think that settles it. There is a breach." Bandar heard the excitement in his teacher's voice, mingled with an overtone of fear.

The preceptor led the way back to the road, Bandar continuing to chant the three, three, and seven. This close to the first level, with its denizens disturbed, anything might happen. Direct contact with a pure archetype meant instant obliteration of the noñnaut's identity and complete absorption. The body left in the waking world would be suffused by the archtypical entity and its subsequent actions would be indistinguishable from those of a full-blown psychotic.

Huffley's face took on an introspective cast and Bandar knew that he

was seeking a direction. After a moment, the old man said, "Do you sense the flux?"

Bandar applied the noönaut mentalism that could identify the location of nodes between Locations and felt a slight but definite sense of motion, representing itself as a gentle breeze. He gestured with his chin in the direction that the "air" seemed to move.

Huffley said, "I concur." He approached the wall on one side of the road and climbed over. Bandar did the same. The old man moved carefully, counting his steps and changing direction so that he traced a zigzagging route across the field. Bandar followed precisely, knowing that each invisible corner turned meant they were stepping around a gateway that would have plucked them from this place and dropped them in some other Location of the Commons where they might face lengthy delays in getting out or encounter lethal challenges.

Working their way through the unseen maze, they came all at once to the great white wall. In the manner of dreams, one moment it was absent, the next it was close by, stretching up and to left and right, with no discernible limit. Here the "breeze" was more pronounced, rippling past the tightly joined blocks of bright, shining stone. Huffley turned to follow its motion and Bandar noticed that the man's knees seemed to have weakened.

With each step the movement of air palpably strengthened. Bandar could feel it tickling the back of his neck and soon he heard a soft whistling over the sound of his continued chanting.

"We are here," said Huffley, a quaver in his voice. He had stopped before a section of the wall that, to Bandar, looked like any other, though the breeze now sounded like the wind that often suffled around the eaves of the undergraduate dormitory back at the Institute. The young man felt a momentary desolation at being so far from home and, perhaps, about to face a peril unprecedented in the long exploration of the Commons. But he summoned his courage and continued to chant.

Huffley reached a trembling hand toward the wall. Bandar could see the hairs stirring on the backs of the preceptor's fingers as their tips approached the stone. Then the age-spotted hand disappeared into the whiteness and swiftly jerked back. Huffley examined the appendage closely but found nothing wrong. He thrust it into the wall again, up to the wrist, then to the elbow. He drew it back and again found no harm.

"Well," he said. "There it is." He sounded short of breath.

Bandar waited for the academician to take the next, logical step. But Huffley just stood before the invisible breach in the barrier. His breath came rapid and raspy. Bandar, still chanting the thran, made motions with his hands, as if to usher the old man forward, but the preceptor had begun to tremble, a wild look in his eye.

Bandar broke off the thran. "Master," he said. "You must look. We have come all this way." He took up the chant again, but Huffley made an inconclusive gesture with a shaking hand, and whispered, "I cannot."

Bandar made shooin motions toward the wall, but Huffley looked away. The academician lowered himself to the ground and sat, disconsolate, his head bowed. "I lack the explorer's courage," he said. "Never in my life have I done what no one else has done before. Nor has anyone on Old Earth or the Ten Thousand Worlds. It is the curse of living in a latter age."

Then I will, thought Bandar, still sounding the three, three, seven thran. He stepped to the wall and, before he could think himself out of it, thrust his head at the space where Huffley's hand had passed through. For a moment all was a white brightness, then his face popped through and he beheld the space beyond.

Here was the archetypal Landscape of the Bololos, which Bandar was not surprised to find looked exactly like the surface of Gamza in the waking world: a level plain of rock, sand, and grit broken here and there by dark patches of lichen. He was surprised, however, that there was no crowd of Bololo archetypes such as those that populated the human Commons. Instead, he saw but one figure in the Location: a large, placid Bololo of indeterminate gender who stood, apparently bemused, and watched the human archetypes that had come through the barrier.

Of course, Bandar thought. *A deeply telepathic species would have a unified psyche from top to bottom — no contending, cooperating fragments, no partial personas — just one self-composed entity.*

He drew his head back into the human noösphere, broke off the thran and said, "Master, the Bololo Commons contains but a single archetype."

Huffley made a small noise and it seemed for a moment that he would rise and take a look, but then his fear of the new reasserted itself and he sank down. Bandar resumed the thran and put his head back through the wall. Now he ignored the Bololo entity and focused on the contaminants

that had been able to pass through the breach caused by the aliens' telepathic resonance.

They were clearly the elements of the ancient archetypal story, *The Lad Who Persevered*. There was the strutting Tyrant, here the forlorn Helpless Mother, there the Enemy Host, rampant for battle, and here the fearless Boy himself, striding toward his destiny. Bandar saw that the tale was nearing its conclusion, the Tyrant having been cast down while the Boy picked up the usurper's fallen sword and positioned himself to strike the final blow.

He pulled his head back to his own side of the wall and again ceased to chant the insulating thran. "It was as you surmised, Master," he said. "The contaminant human archetypes enter the Bololo Commons. There they play their various roles, turning the poor creatures into naturals," — he used the Institute term for victims of psychosis — "for the entertainment of Rul Bazwan's excursionists."

Huffley looked up and said something indistinct, then broke off whatever the remark had been to begin loudly chanting the three, three, seven in a frantic tone, his eyes wide and fixed on something behind Bandar. Bandar immediately joined in the thran and stepped quickly away from the wall. Only when he was well clear did he turn to see what had so frightened his preceptor.

He recognized the grim and towering figure striding toward the breach. It was the archetype known as the Angel of Wrath and Vengeance, usually found only in a few of the noosphere's more apocalyptic Locations; Bandar knew it by its great dark wings, dripping droplets of gore, and its sword of black iron. *And those behind it*, he thought, *are surely the Piacular Legion, their faces dour and their weapons bristling.*

It was clear that another drama was to be enacted after the tale of the Lad was wound up. The Angel marched straight to the wall and passed beyond, its following horde filing through in its train. Bandar shuddered, because he knew what must now ensue in the waking world, for the Angel had borne the face of the Eminence Malabar and the ranks of the Legion had been full of lean men in coarse robes.

When the last of them had disappeared through the breach, he broke off the thran to speak to Huffley, but the preceptor was beyond conversation. Panic had seized control of his face, underlain by a wash of shame.

Bandar swiftly intoned a short thran that would open an emergency exit from the Commons. A shimmering rift appeared in the air before them. The young man thrust his teacher through it and sprang after him.

BANDAR FELL BACK into his body with the jolt that always accompanied an emergency departure from the noosphere. That shock was followed by another: he was no longer seated in the amphitheater above the Bololo feeding station. He and Huffley were in a roofless room with unfinished walls. Above him he saw the thickly starred Gamzan night. Music and the hubbub of a crowd sounded faintly through the floor. Time spent in the Commons could often be elastic; clearly here in the waking world enough time had passed for him and Huffley to have been roped, gagged, and carried back to the Hotel Splendor while they were entranced.

"They're coming out of it," said a voice behind them. "Get the patron up here."

Bandar turned his head and saw the man in the leggings talking into a communicator. The fellow returned him a look that said he shortly expected an enjoyable spectacle. Bandar doubted he would be similarly entertained. Moments passed, and Bandar heard a new sound above the noise from the saloon below: the thin, aggravating whine of untuned gravity obviators coming from behind and above. As the keening sound reached its loudest, the student looked up and saw the Sequestrance's carryall passing overhead from the direction of the Bololo amphitheater, its scarred hull illuminated by the lights of the town. When it banked to head toward the Sequestrance, he noticed that its load of crates was gone.

Bandar grunted through the gag, seeking to attract the preceptor's attention. But Huffley's head was sunk on his chest, the academician offering a portrait of despair.

Now firm footsteps sounded beyond the room and the door opened and closed. A moment later, Rul Bazwan came into the young man's field of vision, wearing an expression that invited no further wasting of his time. In his hand was a wandlike instrument. The implement was unfamiliar to Bandar but he was sure he did not wish to become well acquainted with it.

"This time," said the saloonkeeper, "we will have the truth. Get the

gags off them." When the man in leggings had pulled the rags from their mouths, Bazwan addressed Huffley. "You will tell me what this was all about."

A soft sob escaped the scholar. He did not look up. "I have failed," he said.

"What did you do?" said Bazwan.

Huffley's gaze remained on the floor. "I thought that when the moment came I would be bold. Instead, I quailed. How they will mock."

Bazwan rubbed his chin and showed his lower teeth. He turned his attention to Bandar. "What's he talking about?"

Bandar swallowed. "I think he has gone a little mad," he said. "It is not unheard of amongst the Institute's senior savants."

"Then it's up to you," said the impresario.

"I am happy to cooperate," Bandar said.

"Then I may not need this?" Bazwan touched a control on the device in his hand. It buzzed as if it confined a swarm of hornets. A light glowed darkly red at its tip.

"Definitely not," Bandar assured him.

"We will see," the saloonkeeper said and Bandar saw that the man in leggings was chagrined. Bazwan continued. "Let us begin. You and the old man are scholars from the Institute of Historical Inquiry."

"We are."

"The piddlers brought you in."

"They did."

"To disrupt my legitimate business." Bazwan's voice had taken on an edge.

"I do not deny it."

"And what have you done?"

"Absolutely nothing," said Bandar. "It is not our role to interfere, even if there was anything we could do, which there is not and never was."

Bandar was pleased to hear a less strident tone from his interrogator, though the wand remained within sight and hearing. "Then what were you doing here?"

"We wanted to observe the phenomenon of the Bololo herd. But we could not afford space travel."

Bazwan stroked the scar again and drew down one eyebrow. "You

mean you spun the old piss-artist a tale just to cadge free travel down The Spray?"

Bandar assured him it was so.

"And there is nothing you can do to close the connection between humans and the Bololos?"

"Not a thing. I swear on my honor as a scholar of the Institute."

Bazwan pursed thoughtful lips as he regarded the two of them. "All right," he said after a moment. To Bandar's relief, he extinguished the buzz and glow. "But we had better keep you around for a while just to be sure."

"My master is unwell," Bandar said. "It would be best if I took him home."

"He will come to no harm here. I will send this man out to see what is happening with the autochthones. If all is as it should be, you will be freed in the morning."

Bandar made to protest but Bazwan's response indicated that he would entertain no further objections. When the ringing in Bandar's head stopped, he found that he and Huffley were alone in the room, still bound but ungagged.

"Master," he whispered, "we must depart from here. The Bololos are coming. Listen." He strained his ears. Over the music and ruckus from below he could faintly hear another sound: a chorus of male voices chanting the harsh sutras of the ancient epic, *The Doom that Besmote the Iniquitous*.

Huffley said something indistinct, his attention still fixed upon a space somewhere between his eyes and the floor.

"Master," Bandar said, "I know what Malabar's other plan entailed. I know what was in those crates." He also knew that Rul Bazwan would not quibble over who was responsible for the horror that was about to befall his town.

"Master!" Bandar tried again. If he could bring Preceptor Huffley back into focus, perhaps they could hunch their chairs around and work at each other's knots. "There can be little time. Please!"

But Huffley only sent another mumbled remark in the direction of the floor. Bandar listened again. The chanting from the Sequestrance was louder now, a note of raw excitement infusing the unsympathetic verses.

Bandar could imagine Malabar and the angry hydromants, standing along the south wall, eyeing the darkness beyond the shantytown and waiting for the first glint of spear and halberd in the grip of massive Bololos who were themselves no less in the grasp of an archetypical holy violence.

Huffley began to blubber. Then he abruptly stopped and offered the floor an incoherent rebuttal of some assertion only he had heard made. Bandar realized that his preceptor could be of no further use.

The hydromants' chanting grew louder still and Bandar heard creep into it a note familiar to any schoolchild who has fallen out with his peers and become the target of organized vindictiveness. From the other edge of town he heard a shout, followed by a scream, then a crash of shattered glass and splintering wood. The music from downstairs faltered then stopped and the raised voices took on a new emotion. Sounds came from the street, frightened at first, then overborne by the distinctive tone of Rul Bazwan issuing hurried orders.

Another scream, this one closer, followed by the unmistakable zivv of an energy pistol, then a deep-throated roar and a rush of feet too heavy to be human. Something struck the wall of the Hotel Splendor — it sounded as if it had been the rear of the building — hard enough to make the unroofed walls quake.

Bandar pulled at his bonds but the man in the leggings must have been a perfectionist. He looked again to Huffley and heard a snatch of a nursery song. Now a new clatter arose from beneath the floorboards and Bandar, seeking to make sense of it, reasoned that Bazwan had summoned all who could make it into the hotel and urged them to bar the doors and windows with furniture. The young man lacked faith in that stratagem. The Bololos were very large and motivated by the rage of fanatics. Tables and chairs would offer no obstacle.

There was but one avenue of escape and Bandar took it. He closed his eyes and performed the mental exercises that would take him "down to the basement," as Institute jargon had it. Forcing the pace, he was soon in his uncle's storeroom. He crossed it swiftly, yanked open the anomalous dark door, barely taking time to note that the shadow of Didrick Gabbris wore a deeper sneer than usual before Bandar was racing down the staircase to the road between the walls.

And here he wished he had his preceptor. He could feel the breeze

flowing toward the gap, but the exact place at which to step from the safety of the road and the zigs and zags required to navigate the apparent field? He could only trust to memory. Fortunately, a capacious power of recall and a flair for detail were characteristics every student of the Institute soon mastered. He summoned all the mnemonic strength he possessed, chose a spot along the low gray wall that seemed to answer, and stepped over.

He could picture clearly how Huffley had made the passage. He took four steps forward, then one to his left, two more forward, then six to the right — and stopped dead as a throbbing sensation rippled down the entire front of his virtual body. He leaned slightly backward and it eased.

Very carefully, Bandar shuffled a minim backward. The throbbing meant he had almost blundered into a node. He might have found himself in one of the Landscapes, Situations, or Events that were preserved in the Commons, some of which were almost instantly fatal; a thran could make him invisible to the idiomatic entities on an archetypical battlefield but that was scant help if he arrived just as an artillery barrage was landing — and since the Commons preserved crystallized memes of the most memorable events on its battlefields barrages, cavalry charges, or screaming infantry assaults were always imminent.

Bandar calmed himself and let the memory of Huffley's movements well up in him. He determined that he had come the right way, but that he had let his strides grow fractionally larger than the preceptor's. He turned left and took three carefully measured steps, then right for four and four more forward...and there loomed the topless wall.

He turned in the direction of the flow and shoulder-rubbed his way along the wall until he came to the breach. Without hesitation, he stepped through. His feet grated on the gritty floor of the Bololo Commons, making a scritchng sound that drew the attention of a soldier, one of the Piacular Legion who was slicing the air with a single-edged sword. Delight lit up the archetype's face and it swung the heavy weapon at Bandar's head. The young man leaped back and passed through the wall into the human Commons.

Calling up a mentalism to calm himself, Bandar chanted the three, three, seven and went again into the Bololo noosphere. This time the Legionary did not notice him, and the noonaut paused a moment to take

in the scene. The Angel of Wrath and Vengeance was striding back and forth, gesticulating and exhorting his followers to holy violence. Before its leader, the Legion had deployed into four ranks that were advancing across the empty space, stabbing and splitting the air with the metronomic precision of a fighting machine. Bandar shuddered to think how the actions before his eyes were being replicated by towering Bololos in the waking world.

Beyond the one-sided battle, the Bololo archetype stood and regarded the interlopers with an aspect that Bandar read as puzzled concern. The Angel paid it no heed, intent on acting out the drama of its existence, its wings throwing blood in all directions. A droplet touched Bandar's virtual skin, and he felt as if a hot coal had been pressed against him. He rubbed the blister that was already rising and, dodging the martial display and the towering figure of retribution, he made his way toward the Bololo entity.

Now comes the difficult part, he thought. For a moment, fear came bubbling up in him. To expose oneself to an archetypal entity was an invitation to be absorbed into it, all conscious identity lost in irreducible psychosis. To expose oneself to an alien entity was unheard of, but Bandar told himself that unheard-of seemed to be the motto of the day. Besides, it would not be long before the raging Bololos stormed the Hotel Splendor, and he gave only the slightest of odds that his corporeal body, bound to a chair, would survive the massacre.

Still singing the three, three, seven, he put down his inchoate terror and placed himself before the Bololo archetype. He waited until the Angel and the Legion had marched to the limits of their advance and were marking time, preparing to about-face and come back the way they had gone.

As the grunting fanatics turned on their heels, stabbing the air, Bandar ceased chanting the insulating thran. The looming Bololo archetype noticed him first, and stared down at him with a look of polite interest. Bandar gazed into its calm, dark eyes and saw depths beyond reckoning.

Behind him, a thundering voice shouted words of discovery, answered by a roar from many throats. Bandar heard the thud of hobnailed boots on the hardpacked ground and knew the Legion was coming for him. There was no way back. He fought down another burst of panic and stepped toward the Bololo archetype.

He felt its fur brush his face. There followed a sense of intense dislocation, as if his whole being suddenly blasted into fragments, billions of Bandar-iotas flying in all directions both temporal and spatial, each a dimly sentient spark. Then, just as abruptly, the explosion stopped, froze for an instant that seemed to last forever, then every item of Bandar shrapnel retraced its arc and all coalesced once more into....

Not Bandar. Or, at least, not just Bandar. He was aware of being himself...and yet more. It was as if he had lived all his existence in a small, windowless cell, but now its walls, floor, and ceiling had become porous, transparent glass, and he knew that his cell was but one of an infinite honeycomb of cells, each inhabited by a consciousness, each consciousness aware of every other, and all bound together in a comforting matrix of supernal equanimity. But as he looked deeper into the infinity of the Bololo archetype, he realized that he was seeing more than just what *was* — he was seeing all the Bololos that ever had been, that ever would be, every existence from the beginning of the species to the last of its kind, far off in the unimaginable future. Here they were, all together — and he was one of them.

Here and there he noticed cells whose walls were opaquely dark, like spots of cancer in otherwise healthy tissue. He was cut off from those cells, could feel the separation, and it troubled him.

How long Bandar spent contemplating the immensity of Bololodom he would never know. After a time, he drew his attention back to his own persona in his own cell and saw that he was hunkered down on his haunches — the posture of a Bololo at rest. For no reason other than the training that said always to be active in the Commons — if a noönaut was not doing, he was likely to be done to — he stood up. Immediately, all the Bololo entities in all the cells did likewise.

Bandar raised his right hand in front of his face. So did a billion Bololos. He lifted his left foot, and a billion left hindquarters followed suit. He set down the foot and clapped his hands. The sound came from every direction within the self-contained universe that was the Bololo archetype.

Using an Institute adept's mentalism, Bandar concentrated his will. "I wish to see," he said. At once he was gazing out upon the archetypal Gamza landscape, where the Angel and his Legion had returned to their

martial display. From the height of his perspective on the scene, Bandar knew that he was seeing through the eyes of the Bololo archetype. And from the way Wrath and Vengeance was casting sidelong looks his way, Bandar concluded that the Bololo archetype had already stood up, raised a hand and a foot, then clapped its paws together.

What must happen next was clear to the young scholar. But as he prepared to summon the mental focus necessary, he realized that another imperative tugged at him. It could not be merely a case of *what I will do*. It had to be *what we will do together*. Yet even as he posed the question, the answer came from every direction in space and time: *Yes. We need you to save them/us*.

Bandar/Bololo flexed the enormous muscles of his shoulders, brought up his hands and clenched them. He found that the Bololo's great paws, with their prehensile digits and opposable thumbs, made impressive fists. He swung his heavy head toward the Angel, opened his low slung jaw and shouted, "Hey, you!"

The Angel of Wrath and Vegeance and the legionaries were pure archetypes from the noösphere's outer arrondissement. Unlike the idiomatic entities that populated the various Events, Situations, and Landscapes that filled the interior of the Commons, the pure entities' awareness was almost entirely limited to themselves. Bandar suspected that it was difficult for the Angel, so fixated upon its own attributes, to be aware of such an outlandish entity as Bandar/Bololo. But he intended to get its attention.

The Angel could not ignore the Bololo archetype as it drove through the ranks of the Legion, scattering legionaries like toy soldiers, and delivered a roundhouse blow to the Angel's bearded chin. A look of profound consternation troubled the stern face, but only for the moment it took for Bandar/Bololo's other fist to connect with a short, brutal uppercut. The archetype stumbled backward, its shadowed wings fluttering, the black sword falling from its grasp, and Bandar followed with a two-handed shove that sent the Angel backpedaling on shaking knees.

They had crossed the space to the wall. Bandar noticed that on this side it had the appearance of a natural cliff, then he returned to his task and shoved the Angel one more time. The original surprise on its Malabar-featured face faded and a glower of determination began to assert itself, so

he pushed heavily again, putting all of the Bololo entity's bulk into the effort.

The Angel was driven back into the breach, its great pinions crushed against its sides by the narrowness of the gap. But now its hands reached out, fingers spread against the rock of the cliff face, and Bandar saw rage and resolution firm in its face. It straightened its legs and dug in its armored heels, and its corded shoulder muscles bunched as it prepared to squeeze out of the breach and propel itself at him.

"No!" The word roared from the Bololo throat. He squatted, let his weight rest on his backthrust hands and the broad Bololo tail, and drove both splayed feet into the Angel's chest. The interloping archetype shot through the breach like a stopper from a shaken bottle.

Bandar/Bololo turned to the Legion, but found no threat. Disassociated from their Principal, the subsidiary archetypes had lost their verve and were wandering aimlessly or standing inert. Bandar strode to them, offering buffets and backhands to gain their attention, and soon had them staggering and stumbling toward the opening in the cliff.

The black sword lay on the stony ground. Bandar picked it up and cast it through the unseen gap in the wall. Now there was nothing in the Bololo Commons but a vast plain and a single entity. An inner sense told him that the contaminated cells of the Bololo matrix were returning to health.

Bandar reached a paw toward the cliff face and said to himself and all the others, *We should close this*. Assent came back to him from all directions. He gathered rocks and stones and began to fill in the breach, fitting the pieces closely. When the space was almost chin high, he felt an urge to cease work.

Time for you to go, said a soundless voice within him. He was suddenly back in his cell within the infinite matrix, but only for a moment. He experienced a gentle dissolution, became first a liquid, then a cool vapor. He wafted away from something, toward something else, and then he was once more standing in his virtual flesh before the Bololo entity. It regarded him, as before, with bemusement, then one dark eye closed and reopened in a slow wink of bonhomie. A moment later Bandar was tenderly taken up and put through the remaining gap in the top of the breach. As he slid down into the human Commons, he heard a soft voice say, "Good-bye."

Off in the distance, Bandar could see the ejected Angel and his dejected Legion slouching toward the outer arrondissement. The sword on the ground was already being reabsorbed into the protean stuff of the noosphere. The young man focused himself and chanted the emergency exit thran.

BANDAR WAS BACK in the chair in the roofless room atop the Hotel Splendor, Preceptor Huffley slumped in his bonds beside him. He drew in and let out a long breath. A noise called his attention and he looked over his shoulder to see the door to the room lying smashed on the floor. Filling the doorway, as if it had merely paused in the act of forcing its way in, was a full grown bull Bololo. In its paw it held a thick-bladed falchion. Blood dripped from the weapon's edge. Its dark eyes were fixed on Bandar but it blinked like a sleeper just woken from a dream.

It made to withdraw, the paw that held the curved sword opening. "Wait!" cried Bandar.

The creature paused. Bandar indicated with motions of his head the rope that bound his hands and arms. The Bololo regarded him with stolid disinterest. Then it blinked again, and Bandar saw another presence well up in its dark eyes. It squeezed through the doorway, splintering the jamb, and applied the edge of its weapon to the cords that held him. When the job was done it let the falchion clatter on the floorboards and thrust its way back out of the room.

Rubbing his wrists, urging blood back into his agonized hands, Bandar watched the creature go. It disappeared into the hallway without a backward glance and Bandar turned his attention to Huffley, taking up the sword to cut the old man free. A sound from the doorway made him look up.

The Bololo had returned. Stooping, it poked its heavy head through the doorway. Again, as in the Commons, Bandar saw one eye close then reopen. A giant paw rose to the creature's chest height and the digits executed a gentle wave.

"Good-bye," Bandar said, and then the Bololo was gone for good. The young man pulled the sitting Huffley toward him, hoisted him over one shoulder and left the room. He transited the hallway and descended the

stairs that led down to the saloon. Here he found unappetizing sights. The Bololos, possessed by the hate-filled hydromants, had been as unforgiving as they were thorough. Bandar had seen worse in some Locations within the noösphere — the Slaughter of the Innocents and the Pillage of the Defenseless City were egregiously gruesome — but he found it was different when the victims could not be reconstituted to begin the cycle all over again. From beneath a shattered gaming table protruded the head and torso of the young woman who had taken his order only a few hours before. He looked elsewhere and noticed that the corpse of Rul Bazwan was not to be seen.


There was more horror outside. Those who had been overwhelmed by the initial assault lay where they had fallen. Bandar picked his way through the carnage to a high-wheeled vehicle on the other side of the street. Bazwan's henchman lay in two pieces just short of the step that led up to the control chair. Bandar tucked Huffley into the passenger compartment, ignoring the disconnected words and salty expletives that the preceptor intermittently issued forth. The student took charge of the vehicle and guided it into an alley that wandered toward the Sequestrance. From time to time the wheels bumped over what lay strewn about the ground, but Bandar steeled himself against the inevitable thoughts.

He angled up the slope to the Sequestrance, then paralleled its wall until he could turn the corner and strike out across open ground. Over the hum of the vehicle's motilator he heard discordant cries and moans from within the walls. He speculated on whether there might have been "blowback" from the hydromants' deliberate summoning of prime archetypes, especially Malabar's close association with the Angel of Wrath and Vengeance — he suspected that the Eminence had not been more than a short hop and skip from psychosis to begin with, so the channel would have already been well lubricated.

From the passenger compartment, Huffley expostulated energetically to some unseen interlocutor, claiming that since he had baked the cake himself, he would have the first slice, and malodorous roommates could wait their turn. Listening further, Bandar deduced that the old man had been catapulted back into his youth, when he had shared quarters with an unpleasant young man to whom Huffley had given the name

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Fartywhiff. He let the preceptor ramble on and concentrated on guiding the vehicle out to the barebones spaceport. When they arrived, Huffley was hissing something about "My Lord High Hiedyin of Fulldoodledom." Bandar made the old man as comfortable as he could on a tattered settee within the shed and made sure that their travel vouchers were still in the preceptor's wallet. Then he activated the beacon that would inform any passing spaceship that passengers desired transport offworld.

 **ON THE SECOND-CLASS** liner that took them the last leg of their multistage journey back from Gamza, Bandar composed a series of papers dealing with the discoveries that he had made: that interspecies telepathic noöspheric connections were indeed possible; that archetypically induced psychosis could be transmitted across species lines; that a telepathic species could have a unitary archetype that enfolded not only their dead but individuals not yet born (there were fascinating metaphysical aspects to that one); and that a human consciousness could be absorbed into an alien archetype and be regurgitated without experiencing psychosis. Bandar had tested himself thoroughly and was almost completely sure that he was returning home as sane as he had left.

The same could not be said for Preceptor Huffley, who daily sank deeper into a private and idiosyncratic world of constant argumentation and vicious debate, in which, though frequently beset, he always triumphed by bedtime.

When the liner touched down at the Olkney space port, offshore on an island in Mornedy Sound, Bandar was surprised to find a delegation of the Institute's superior officers and senior fellows at the bottom of the gangplank. He allowed Huffley to go first, the old man descending to Old Earth once more in the middle of a one-sided colloquy with the repellent Fartywhiff.

As the preceptor reached the group, no less a potentate than Overdean Fartherthwaith stepped forward. In tones of studied outrage he demanded to know what the preceptor had done to cause dire claims to be levied against the Institute's treasury by distant offworlders. "Some rogue called Rul Bazwan — from where do they get these barbarous names? — demands restitution for a town smashed with all its contents. He claims extraordinary

sums in general, special and exemplary damages. And there's another from some transcendental mountebank who wants you returned to face summary justice, which I gather involves capital punishment followed by revivification for as many repetitions as your parts will sustain."

Huffley looked in the Overdean's direction but Bandar saw that the old man's eyes did not encompass the scene before him. "I'm afraid Preceptor Huffley has suffered an onset of the adbdabs," he said, referring to an ailment that could afflict noōnauts who, in Institute jargon, "tarried too long at the fair."

Fartherthwaith peered at Huffley and listened briefly to what the preceptor was saying. "Sounds more like the blithers to me," he said. "I always thought he'd be susceptible, even when we were boys. In either case, he'll have to go to the sanctuary." At this pronouncement, the Overdean brightened and rubbed his palms against each other with vigor. "Of course, that means he was incompetent to represent the Institute, thus all claims against us for whatever he did are nuncupative." His hands rubbed each other again, making a scritchng sound reminiscent of insect wings. "Fetch my volante," he said, "We are overdue for lunch."

"Sir," said Bandar, "As a result of our experiences, I have several new data to offer. I have taken the liberty of drafting four papers."

Fartherthwaith froze for a moment, then peered at the student. "Exactly who are you?" he said.

"Guth Bandar, sir, third year."

"You were with Huffy during all this foofaraw?"

"I was."

"Now think about this, and answer carefully," the Overdean said, accompanying his words with a look that was charged with meaning, "were you at any time named to anyone on Gamza?"

"I'm sure I wasn't."

"Were you officially identified as associated with the Institute? Was identification asked for and did you proffer it?"

"No, I was not officially credentialed."

"Very good, because you are not in any way connected with the Institute."

"But my lord Overdean...."

Fartherthwaith leaned toward him and winked. "Come back in a year

or so, when this is all as forgotten as Cholleysang's poetry, and we'll slip you back in. There's a good boy." He turned away with the happy air of one who has avoided a sordid complication.

Bandar called after him. "But sir, the new data."

He pulled the papers from his satchel and waved them futilely. His words were not heard over the powerful thrum of the Overdean's descending aircar. The officials climbed into its luxurious accommodations and the volante sped aloft, its powerful backdraft sweeping the documents from Bandar's hands and strewing them across the waves of Mornedy Sound.

Preceptor Huffley stood squinting after the departed vehicle. "Fatuous Fartywhiff," he said, apropos of nothing.





BOOKS TO LOOK FOR

CHARLES DE LINT

The Three Incestuous Sisters, by Audrey Niffenegger, Abrams, 2005, \$27.95.

THIS IS A gorgeous book. I don't want to say it's a picture book — although there are very few words and a lot of illustrations — because it's not the sort of production you normally get in a traditional picture book. It's not a graphic novel, either. Audrey Niffenegger — the author and illustrator — calls it a visual novel, and I think the best explanation as to why there are so few words can be found in her afterword where she explains her creative process:

"I created the story in pictures, sketching page spreads the way a director might work out a storyboard for a film. I wrote the text; as the images gained in complexity, the text dwindled until the weight of

the story was carried by the images."

It makes perfect sense as you read the story of these three sisters, living in a distant house near a lighthouse, whose lives are forever changed by the death of the lighthouse keeper and the arrival of his handsome son to take his place.

It's not a story for children, though it does unfold with a simple, fairy tale clarity. And it's not that there is anything particularly offensive going on. It's just that the themes and emotional resonances are mature, and I'm not sure children would really get much out of it.

The art is reminiscent of Edward Gorey with its simple gray lines and delicate colors, and by saying that, I certainly don't mean that it was easy to produce. I have to admire Niffenegger's tenacity to stick with this project. She took thirteen years making the aquatints (prints made from zinc plates

that have the linework etched onto them before the printing process), then used watercolors to paint each print. The book was originally published in a handmade edition of ten and was obviously a work of love.

Regular readers of this column might remember us discussing Niffenegger's previous book, *The Time Traveler's Wife*, a while back. *The Three Incestuous Sisters* couldn't be more different from that more traditional novel (traditional, at least, in terms of presentation — certainly not in ideas or structure). But the new book is easily as absorbing and as fascinating, with worlds of possibility and meaning to be gleaned from its sparse wordage and exquisite art.

I have to admit that I don't understand the title, and I went looking in my dictionary to make sure I knew what the word "incestuous" really meant. Turns out I was right. It has to do with "sexual relations between persons so closely related that they are forbidden by law or religion to marry." Since that never happens in the book, I have to put it away on my book shelf, still puzzled as to what Niffenegger meant by it.

But otherwise, as I said at the outset, this is a truly gorgeous book.

Plucker, by Brom, Abrams, 2005, \$24.95.

Now *Plucker* (the artist Brom's first excursion into prose) is a picture book — properly, it's an illustrated book — albeit not one for kids.

You might think differently at first from the plot description of abandoned toys becoming animated and taking on an evil creature that springs to life from an African spirit doll, but a quick flip through the pages will call up dark and gothic images with a decided gruesome bent.

Which isn't to say it's a bad book. It's just not for kids, or at least, it should certainly be vetted by a parent before it's passed along to a younger reader.

The story's novella-length, and while the prose is certainly serviceable, it doesn't have the same impact as the art. Brom has a gift for laying out painterly images, and the production values of the book play to the strength of his art as it delves into the struggles of the spring toy Jack to defend Thomas (the child who abandoned him) against the evil spirit that becomes his nemesis.

The Coming of Conan the Cimmerian, by Robert E. Howard, Ballantine Books, 2005, \$29.95.

The Conquering Sword of Conan, by Robert E. Howard, Ballantine Books, 2005, \$15.95.

Unlike, say, the Tarzan books, Robert E. Howard's Conan stories remain readable long past one's adolescent years. Both Howard and Burroughs were great storytellers — their narrative thrust pulls one through the books and it's hard to stop reading them once you've begun — but where Burroughs leaves at least this reader uncomfortable with his racist undertones, Howard's stories can still stir the blood.

They're not high art, but then they weren't created as high art. They were written at a per-word rate for the pulps — a medium akin, one might say, to what television became: a chance to let go of the worries of work and politics for a few hours and immerse one's self in a bit of armchair adventure. Now you have to work a little harder with a book, since it's not laid out for you on the TV screen, but the payoff is usually worth it.

These books are reprints of the Wandering Star Books editions originally published in England, fea-

turing Howard's original text, with illustrations by Mark Schutz (*The Coming of...*) and Gregory Manchess (*The Conquering Sword...*). To be honest, it's getting a little hard to keep track of all the various editions that have been coming out, but if you haven't tried Howard yet, these are as good a place as any to start since, between the pair of them, they feature some of his best work.

Stories like "The Tower of the Elephant," "Queen of the Black Coast," and "Red Nails" are timeless, with more punch, imagination, and verve than much of the fantasy being written today. Howard cared about his characters, and it shows. And he had a storytelling gift that remains formidable today, long after his death.

I'm not saying that every Conan story is terrific. There are certainly clunkers, but the percentage of good far outweigh the lesser entries in the Cimmerian's canon, and they're well worth the investment of your time.

Forever Odd, by Dean Koontz, Bantam, 2005, \$27.

It's December as I write this and I guess I was a good boy this year because I found a copy of the

new Koontz novel waiting for me at the local bookstore early in the month.

Forever Odd is a direct sequel to 2003's *Odd Thomas*, the book in which we were introduced to the title character, a young man who can see the dead. They can't talk to him, but they can nudge him in the direction they want, which is usually to help them tidy up some unfinished business from when they were alive. The ghost of Elvis is back as well, and this time Thomas comes to understand why the old rock 'n' roller is haunting the small town of Pico Mundo, CA.

But that's just icing on the cake. The main plot revolves around the kidnapping of a childhood friend of Thomas' — a situation that only his unique talents can hope to rectify. The prose remains as streamlined as it has been for the past few Koontz books, propelling the story

along at a heartstopping rate.

I'm usually leery of sequels, but Koontz gets it all right. The book plays off the previous novel, but doesn't repeat it. The character growth continues, and if the ending isn't as immediately shocking as was the one for *Odd Thomas*, it's certainly disconcerting all the same. But also completely appropriate, once you think about it.

I have to admit that I'm constantly in awe of how someone like Koontz, with the large body of work he already has behind him, can still come out sounding as fresh and vigorous as he does with each new release. But I'm certainly happy that such is the case.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.





BOOKS

ELIZABETH HAND

Counting Heads, by David Marusek, Tor, 2005, \$24.95.

The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil, by George Saunders, Riverhead Books, 2005, \$13.

The Encyclopedia of Fantastic Victoriana, by Jess Nevins, Monkeybrain Books, 2005, \$50.

Supernatural Literature of the World: An Encyclopedia, edited by S. T. Joshi & Stefan Dziemianowicz, Greenwood Press (in 3 volumes), 2005, \$299.95.

THE GOLDEN AGED

I 'LL ADMIT it: I worry a lot about burning out on science fiction. At first, my concern was that, after nearly two decades, the effort of reading and writing the stuff every day might finally be taking its toll. But of late my real fear has been

that the destabilizing effects of actually *living* in the dystopian world I read and worried about back in the 1960s and 1970s might simply push me over the edge. Big Brother, cloning, global warming, environmental catastrophe, massive overpopulation, freakish viruses, exploding spaceships, Virtual Reality, artificial intelligence, the Singularity: it's one thing to think about this stuff for fun. It's quite another to wake up and realize that today is the Bad Tomorrowland we dreamed about yesterday. The great dystopic works of the last century have been overtaken by events. It's hard to be entertained (and even dystopias need to entertain) by 1984 or *Fahrenheit 451*, if one knows that Big Brother is monitoring one's contributions to Greenpeace while radical Christians make a bonfire of *Harry Potter* books. It's even harder, maybe, to stimulate a palate jaded by thirty-odd years of reading science fiction.

All of which is a long way of

saying that David Marusek's *Counting Heads* is the most exciting debut sf novel I've read since *Neuromancer*. My first exposure to Marusek was his heartbreaking 1999 novella "The Wedding Album," a cautionary tale for those whose dreams of longevity tip over into immortality. "The Wedding Album" and later stories like "VTV" and "Listen to Me" were warning shots across the bow for *Counting Heads*, an exuberantly inventive page-turning dystopia so crammed with memorable, beautifully drawn characters and day-after-tomorrow scientific breakthroughs that for several nights I dreamed that Marusek's world is the one I live in.

Soon, it might well be. Samson (Sam) Harger, the man at the center of the novel's often dizzying whirl of characters — human, cloned, simulated and otherwise — was born in 1951, the same year as Marusek, and also shares his creator's background as a graphic designer. The book opens in the year 2092, not long after Sam has met Eleanor Starke, the woman who becomes his latest (and last) wife. Sam is briefed on her by his personal AI, who informs him that, despite looking like a woman in her mid-twenties, Eleanor is

"...between 180 and 204 years old. She earns over a million a year, no living offspring, degrees in History, Biochemistry, and Law. Hobbies include fencing, chess, and recreational matrimony.... And her celebrity futures are trading at 9.7 cents."

In Marusek's near-future, the famous stay famous forever, as long as they can afford their rejuvenation upkeep, anyway. Nanotechnologies allow wealthy individuals to remain ever young, but even the not-so-well-off can save their credits, choose an age — twelve, seventeen, thirty — and stick with it. Nano weapons bombard the protective canopies erected above cities in response to the Outrage, the twenty-first century's prolonged war of terror. Other nano weapons, nicknamed slugs, patrol the cities and randomly check individuals for signs of treason. Itinerants — clones and other bioengineered humans — and AIs do most of the grunt work, with unreconstructed individuals seeing to those jobs that still need a human touch. The main challenge for the wealthy upper class "affs" is to keep themselves amused and, of course, youthful.

The first part of *Counting*

Heads is drawn from an earlier story, "We Were Out of Our Minds With Joy." Sam, the narrator, is a successful artist turned packaging designer, Eleanor a Type-A businesswoman who might be the unholy spawn of Donald Trump and Martha Stewart. Their wedding, streamed live on the Wedding Channel, brings in "1.325 million billable hours of wedding viewership." And their honeymoon (five days on the real moon) is interrupted by the news that Eleanor has been nominated to the Board of Governors of the Tri-Discipline Council. Eleanor accepts the position, which makes her one of the ten most powerful people alive. Shortly afterward, she and Sam are granted a rare permit that will allow them to become biological parents of a baby that will be grown from a confiscated fetus conceived in an illegal pregnancy.

But before this happy event takes place, something horrible happens. Sam is probed by a defective Homeland Command slug that mistakenly identifies him as carrying nano weaponry and so looses a nano counter-assault that boils through Sam's entire body, burning his neurological system. The probe leaves the anguished Sam permanently infected — "seared,"

in Marusek's terminology — with nano monitors. As a security chief of staff explains,

"Tiny wardens have been installed into each of your body's cells. Any attempt to hijack your cellular function or alter your genetic makeup will cause that cell to self-immolate. Roll up your sleeve and scratch your arm."

I did as she said. I raked my skin with my fingernails. Flakes of skin cascaded to the floor, popping and flashing like a miniature fireworks display.

The chief of staff continued. "Likewise, any cell that expires through natural causes and becomes separated from your body self-immolates. When you die, your body will cook at a low heat."

Sam's civil rights have also been revoked, including his right to father a child. His DNA is erased, his genome destroyed as well as his personal AI. A true demolished man, he is left with the last and most humiliating legacy of the seared: the putrid, ineradicable stench which makes it impossible for them to move among others without triggering a gag reflex.

Still, Eleanor, now one of the world's Governors, doesn't abandon him. She gives Sam a home in her heavily armed compound, and since she's rarely in physical attendance — her sims do all the requisite communication — Sam's stench doesn't bother her. He becomes stepfather to her daughter, Ellen, bioengineered from simulated DNA and Eleanor's own genes; but Sam is too physically and psychologically damaged to remain for long. Two days after Ellen's first birthday, he leaves his wife and stepchild forever.

Part Two picks up forty years later. Sam is still alive, living in a charterhouse, a communal home whose residents put up with his stink in exchange for the living credits he gives them — Homeland Command has long since tried to make financial remuneration to the unjustly seared, whose straightforward method of drawing attention to their plight, public self-immolation, has brought them much public sympathy in the last few decades. Eleanor and Ellen are returning from space when their yacht is sabotaged on reentry. Eleanor's body is burned beyond any hope of reclamation through the regrowth techniques that have made death a bad dream for most

affs; Ellen is another matter. Her head, still encased in a deployed safety helmet, has been saved and brought to a private clinic where it will serve as a kind of human sourdough starter to generate a new Ellen.

But who assassinated Eleanor? ("No one of her stature has died since Stalin," a colleague dryly observes.) And what will become of Ellen's head?

So begins a labyrinthine and surprisingly upbeat tour of Marusek's dystopic future, with Ellen's head serving as the Maguffin that sets all sorts of characters, human and non-, on a wild Caucus-race that would dizzy Lewis Carroll's Alice. There are Sam's post-hippie housemeets, including Bogdan and Kitty, retrokids who have chosen to remain pre-pubescent forever; Fred and Mary, married clones who, against the odds, begin to suffer "clone fatigue" and develop personality traits unrelated to their genetic types; the diminutive Merrill Meewee, a man who served on the board of the Garden Earth Project with Eleanor; and numerous AIs, from Ellen's personal attendant, or mentar, a tiny Neanderthal named Wee Hunk, to Eleanor's loyal, chilly Cabinet and the more ominous, super-efficient Concierge.

The loyal, decent Meewee is the one closest to Eleanor, recruited by her for the Garden Earth Project because of his ability to communicate with the world's less fortunate persons. GEP is an ostensibly altruistic venture in sending millions of human colonists out in vast generation starships, in exchange for their land, which will then be allowed to revert to its pristine wilderness state. What GEP's "volunteer" colonists don't realize is that the project is in fact spearheaded by Earth's wealthiest affs, who intend to get rid of the riffraff so they can claim private ownership of our planet: the solar system's biggest gated community. The resulting skull-duggery and derring-do, much of it executed by non-human characters, is intricate and sometimes confusing — all those affs, nanos, mentars, HUDs, TUGs, slugs, not to mention *mano a mano* nanos: ono!

But Marusek's world is so lovingly detailed, and his characters so warmly drawn, that momentary concerns — like, what the heck is actually going on? — tend to be swept away by the author's tireless, indeed exhausting, imagination. This is science fiction of the first order, and quite old-fashioned sf too. There are infodumps a-plenty, distinguished (mostly) by their

brevity and clarity; enough neologisms and cunning acronyms to keep fans and academics alike happy for years to come; careful decodings of the clone society, which is both remarkably intricate and utterly believable — Marusek's background in cultural anthropology is especially well deployed here.

Counting Heads contains echoes and resonances of numerous other writers — John Varley's humanism, as well as his clones and generation starships; Samuel R. Delany's braided social networks; William Gibson's vertiginous VRs; the nanotechnologies employed in Kathleen Ann Goonan's novels and Walter Jon Williams's *Aristoi*; the iconic AI sigils of John Clute's *Appleseed* and M. John Harrison's *Light*; Pat Cadigan's raffish street urchins; the surveillance wasps of John Crowley's "Snow," and, over all of these, the long shadows cast by Alfred Bester's *The Stars My Destination* and *The Demolished Man*. Marusek is capable of standing at ease among them.

If there are weaknesses to *Counting Heads*, most of them lie in its loose, slightly loopy narrative. The alternating points of view begin to take on the quality of a long relay, with the narrative baton passed breathlessly from one to the

next. By the novel's end, the story begins to run out of steam even as the pacing picks up, so that the ultimate effect is of smashing through the finish line without a real clear memory of the last twenty or so pages. Marusek does a beautiful job of extrapolating a future from our present, but there are no giddy leaps that present us with something that we might not have anticipated: the book seems very much of its moment, which is now. Its fascinations and obsessions — eternal youth and even more eternal litigation (there are some very amusing riffs on legal matters), instantaneous communication, identity theft, the limits of information collection and dissemination; the fall-out from the war on terror and the looming specter of a surveillance culture; our unease with cloning, reproductive technologies, and artificial intelligence — are ours. *Counting Heads* functions more as a funhouse tour of a particularly Western, affluent, cultural moment, than it does as a tocsin, like *1984* or *Stand on Zanzibar*. We see little concrete evidence of the billions of sweating, starving people in Marusek's dystopia, though its underlying plot generator — the Garden Earth Project — turns on getting rid of them. Likewise, there's a lot of

complicated AI relationships, but little sense of what real human beings do with their needs for sex and love, which presumably have not yet been outmoded. The most moving and (by early twenty-first-century standards) realistic relationship in the novel is that between its most provocative characters, the clones Fred and Mary, whose tentative and ultimately exhilarating evolution toward a more human status is one of the book's great triumphs.

In an interview, David Marusek stated that, like some of his memorable creations, he thinks he'll live to be at least two hundred years old; maybe even three hundred. *Counting Heads* isn't just one of the best first sf novels to come down the pike in some time; it's one of the best novels, period. I hope David Marusek will be writing more of them for centuries to come.

BORDER PATROL

George Saunders, author of the story collections *Pastoralia* and *Civilwarland in Bad Decline*, writes funny, sideways speculative fiction, tales that have more in common with Kelly Link's short stories, or the cinematic visions proffered by Charlie Kaufman, than with most mainstream sf. His near-future

world is recognizably ours, with even more mindspace and real estate deeded to a WalMart economy; his disaffected narrators talk the way I imagine most of today's young teenagers will, ten or fifteen years down the road, their argot equal parts IM slang and advertising slogans. I'd love to see him turn his talents to a full-scale sf novel.

But Saunders's newest work, the novella-length *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil*, is a political fable. It's amusing but lacking in real moral heft, despite its timely targets: a political administration, ruled by an idiot, attempting to control the flow of immigrants within its borders.

"It's one thing to be a small country, but the country of Inner Horner was so small only one Inner Hornerite at a time could fit inside, and the other six Inner Hornerites had to wait their turns to live in their own country while standing very timidly in the surrounding country of Outer Horner."

Saunders cites Edwin Abbott's *Flatland* as an influence on his fable, and says that the idea came to him before the onset of our current political administration. Still, it's hard

to read *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil* without drawing certain, er, conclusions as to its targets —

"Mr. President," Phil said when the applause had died down. "May I also say how proud I am to have been appointed your Special Border Activities Coordinator?"

"Well of course you're proud," said the President. "Why wouldn't you be? That's an important job. And I'm glad I appointed you that. If in fact I did. Did I? Did I do that in conjunction with that decree about that Tax thingie?"

"May I suggest we go to the people again?" said the Advisor.

"By all means," said the President, still very much moved by the standing ovation he had recently received.

What does it say about our world, when Saunders's absurdist take on it — a planet whose residents include someone "who resembled a gigantic belt buckle with a blue dot affixed to it, as if a gigantic belt buckle with a blue dot affixed to it had been stapled to a tuna fish can," a place "where cows'

heads grew out of the earth shouting sarcastic things at anyone who passed" — doesn't actually seem extreme enough? In Saunders's world, the horrible Phil gets his just due:

"And that is where Phil is today: hidden in a thicket of weeds, not loved, not hated, just forgotten, rusting/rotting, with even the sign that proclaims his name fading away."

We should be so lucky.

REFERENCE SHELF

Finally, new reference works, one of which should become indispensable to anyone with three inches of empty shelf space. That would be Jess Nevins's *The Encyclopedia of Fantastic Victoriana*, a magical and marvelously eccentric portmanteau volume that begs to be dipped into time and time again. Nevins may not have set out to create a scholarly or all-inclusive work, but he ended up with one; a roadmap to themes and characters, many of them obscure, who appear in Victorian popular fiction — science fiction, fantasy, detective stories, and the like. "I've tried to...strike a balance between the important, the entertaining, and the goofy," he

states in his foreword, and who could possibly resist that?

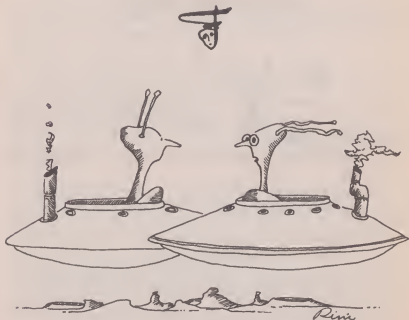
Not me. So *The Encyclopedia of Fantastic Victoriana* gives us entries on Detectives and Sherlock Holmes, but not Sir Arthur Conan Doyle; Diamond Dick and lots of Doctors — Doctor Coppelius, Doctor Caresco, Doctor Halifax, Doctor Heidegger, all the way to Doctor Yen How, who appears in M. P. Shiel's *The Yellow Danger*, which Nevins calls "one of the vilest Yellow Peril novels of the 19th century." Ethelind Fionguala gets her own entry — "It is not known what Ethelind Fionguala was like before the vampires took her" is an enticing morsel from it.

If you want to read more about Ethelind (and who wouldn't?), you will have to buy this book, which will allow you to also read Nevins's astute entry on Proto-Mysteries, with its fascinating digression into the *Newgate Calendar*; as well as Rinaldo Rinaldini, Monsieur Synthesis, Lord James Marauder, and Gondez the Monk, "a delightful combination of maliciousness, lust, ambition, and craven spite." *The Encyclopedia of Fantastic Victoriana* is one thousand pages long; its fifty-dollar price tag can be significantly reduced by buying it from online vendors, which makes it not

only one of the best books of the year but one of the best bargains too. Of one obscure text, Nevins states, "*A Strange Manuscript* is the final result of a good, educated mind spending its time and energy on a project which eventually bored it." Jess Nevins directed his very fine, educated mind to a task that obviously delighted him, and will do the same for many many readers.

S. T. Joshi and Stefan Dziemianowicz's three-volume *Supernatural*

Literature of the World: An Encyclopedia, is a more straightforward effort. The entries are extensive (though there were errors in at least one of them), running the gamut from film to fiction to theme entries to authors, and many entries are appealingly outfitted with illustrations or excerpts. The price tag may put this out of reach of most casual readers, but for those with deeper pockets, this reference work may be indispensable.



"For a moment I thought I'd discovered hyperdrive,
but it was only the coffee."

Gene Wolfe reports that his new Latro novel, Soldier of Sidon, should be out in the fall. He's also working with artist Lisa Snellings-Clark on a chapbook, the title of which will probably be Strange Birds. Word is that the chapbook will probably be published in early June. His latest tale is short but potent.

Bea and Her Bird Brother

By Gene Wolfe

“**Y**OU JUST MISSED YOUR brother,” the nurse said.
Bea glanced at her watch. “He can’t have stayed long.” It was six; visiting

hours were six to eight.

“He wasn’t supposed to be in there,” the nurse said. “I didn’t see him until he left.”

Bea signed the screen and went to the elevator. It was smooth and silent — remarkably so, she thought, for a hospital built in the nineteen-twenties.

The corridor looked clean, though she knew the boy-high dark green and the tousled-hair-to-ceiling light green had been chosen to hide dirt. Before she was born these walls had been white and immaculately clean and these halls had smelled of disinfectant instead of room deodorant.

Things didn’t always get better. Sometimes they got worse. Dad would go. Soon. Very soon. Go, and never come back to her.

“Hello, Dad.” She gave the old man in the bed her best and brightest. “How are you feeling today?”

"Light." His voice was thin but melodious, as if some tiny person in his throat were playing a flute. Old men were not supposed to have voices like that. For the first time it occurred to her that no one enforced such things.

"Sit down, Bea. I can't see you."

She sat, the hospital chair so low, and the hospital bed so high, that their faces were nearly at a level. "Did Benjy come? One of the nurses said he had."

"Him?" The fluting little voice was not contemptuous, only tired. "He won't come. Never."

His eyes turned toward her, moving more slowly than other eyes. Their whites were yellow. "You're sitting. That's good. I've got to tell you about the bird people."

Bird watchers, she thought.

"The Big Folks didn't like us, Bea. Spread poison to wipe us out. Me and Annie, we run. Maybe others run, too. I don't know. Only there wasn't any with us. It was just me and Annie for...I don't know. It seems long sometimes, when I think back. Only...."

"Who was Annie, Dad?"

"Maybe it was only a day or two. Maybe three before they got her. After I buried her, I just kept going deeper in to get away from them, Bea. Oh, I knew where a gate was. I just didn't want to go back. Back to what? That was the question. That was always it. Ugly buildings on ugly streets and work I hated. That was what it was to me, and I knew it and didn't want it."

"But, Dad...."

"You won't ever understand why I stayed, because you won't ever see it. Flowers bigger than I am, and smell so sweet it got you drunk. Cold springs to drink of, and hot springs. Some so hot you had to walk a mile down to wash. Trees up to the sky, and people with wings living in them."

"Bird people, Dad? Is that what you meant?"

"I could climb those trees, Bea, or some of them. The ones with rough bark, you know. Climb way high up. Only I didn't have wings. I'd watch, every day. At night, when I'd found a little hollow or something way high up, I'd dream about it — how I'd wake up with wings and go flying from tree to tree and sometimes way up to the tops of the tallest, up where the

air was thin and cold. I'd wake up, and for a minute or two I'd think it was real and feel for my wings and try to move 'em." The old man in the bed chuckled, a ringing of wooden chimes very far away. "I'd cry then, sometimes, Bea. Bawl like a baby. You'd have been shamed of me."

"I'd never be ashamed of you, Dad."

"I said the day would never come when I decided to go back, only I was wrong. I got to missing certain things and forgetting certain others, and decided I'd had enough. I'd learned the language, you see, or bits of it, only I'd never be one of them. And I knew it. I told myself they weren't my kind — which was the truth — and it would be better for me to get back to my own people. Which wasn't."

"Are we so bad?"

"Not you, Bea. Off I went. It was slow, you see. If I'd had wings, I could have done it in an hour. Only I didn't, and that was the whole trouble. I had to walk, and ground was the most dangerous place. The higher you got, the safer you were. How it always was there. So I'd go from limb to limb when I could. Sometimes they touched, and I could step over. Sometimes I had to jump, and that was risky. Sometimes there was nothing close enough. I'd have to go down to the ground, a long climb down and a long climb back up. Scared, too. Scared every minute I was on the ground, and every minute when I was just down low."

Bea smoothed her skirt over her knees, as she always did when she was thoughtful. "There are things...certain things I recall from childhood, Dad. The dog that mauled Benjy when we were little.... You were never scared, never scared of anything or anybody, and everybody knew it. All the kids. All the neighbors."

Dry and remote, the chuckle returned. "After being there? No. No, I wasn't. I'd got away from things that would've eaten that little doggie for a snack. You hid, too, once. Remember that?"

"When I was little, Dad?" For the first time, Bea really saw the hospital room, all taupe and pastel green, save for the bouquet she had sent from the office. "Sure. Lots of times. Behind the couch, mostly. Under the dining room table. Even in the clothes hamper."

"Further back."

She smoothed her skirt again. "Well, it was —"

"Not that time. Go back further."

"You didn't even let me say it, Dad."

"You hadn't gone far enough. Your eyes told me. Further. The first time you ever hid. The very first."

"But — "

"Back. Go back now. I'm not going to be around much longer, Bea."

She shut her eyes, and something horrible stalked the dark, strewing its sharp stench on the sweet, moist air.

"There! That's it. Where are you?"

"In the leaves." She heard her own voice, and had no idea what it was talking about. "Big leaves, Dad...." Her eyes opened. "They can't have been as big as that."

"You remembered." He was trying to smile, this though Death (invisible, ever-present) blew each flickering smile away. "Wanted to see if you could. I found your ma, Bea. Found her on the ground one day when I was trying to get back here. She'd hurt her wing. Hit a limb or something. She was never sure what. Not Elsie. This isn't Elsie."

"My real mother."

"That's right, Bea. Your real mother. I called her Ava, even if it wasn't her name. I couldn't sing the real one, so Ava's what I called her."

"You and Mom always said I was adopted." The flowers should have perfumed the room, but for some reason they did not. There was only odor of the spray.

"It was true in a way, Bea. Elsie adopted you, and when Benjy came she treated you — "

Bea shook her head. "She's gone, Dad. Don't get me started on how she treated me. The woman's name was Ava?"

"No...not really. It was just what I called her. I couldn't sing her real name. Didn't I say? She'd hurt her wing, the one over on the right side. It wasn't cut off or anything, but she couldn't fold it right, and she couldn't fly. She used to lay it over us both when we slept."

Bea would have objected, but something inside seemed to be choking her.

"She's ready to die when I found her. She hadn't been getting a thing to eat. I climbed, and ate some myself, and carried some down to her." The old man's eyes closed.

"Dad?"

"Just remembering, Bea. I'm not ready to go yet, and I won't go till I am." He fell silent, breathing deeply.

She waited, and at last he said, "I had to beg her to eat. I put it in her mouth and begged her to chew. All sign language, you know. I couldn't sing it at all then, and I never did sing it well. Not half what they did. But I got her to eat, and she felt a little better afterward, a little stronger, and I got her to climb up a ways. Not far, but we were off the ground, and that was safer."

Bea nodded, wondering whether he had always been — like this. Was this what he had been hiding so long, this irrationality?

"Pretty soon we climbed way, way up, the two of us. We built a nest up there — a better one than the flying ones did, because I knew more about building. I had more patience, too. By then I knew she was going to lay. She'd told me, part by signs. But part by song, because I'd got to where I could understand a little, and even sing back a bit myself. It always made her laugh, but I didn't mind."

"Elsie used to laugh at you, too," Bea said. "That was the only time I felt sorry for you. You were so good, so competent. But you'd try to explain baseball to her, and you never seemed to understand that she didn't want to know."

"I never did understand people who don't want to know, Bea." The distant flute was humble now, apologetic for a fault found only in the instruments of music. "Now, well, maybe you don't want to know this. About Ava and me. But it's about you, too, so you ought to."

"And it's been tearing you up for years, keeping it in." Bea sighed, and wondered whether her flowers were starting to droop, just as she was. "So go on. Please go on. I want to know." How long would the knowledge that her father had died insane tear her up?

"She laid, and it was two eggs like I knew it would be. When the women laid, it was always two. I asked about it one time and she showed me her breasts — one child for each nipple is what she said, and I still think it makes more sense than what we do."

For the rest of her life, probably.

"The eggs are pretty. Not just white or brown like hens' eggs. Big blue eggs with white and gold speckles. The way they usually do is for the woman to warm them while the man gets something to eat, and him to

while she does. But I was better at finding food than Ava was, and a better climber, so I'd get enough for us both and bring it back to the nest, and we'd eat it there together."

Trying to be brave, Bea nodded. "That's nice."

"It was. It sure was. I think back, and...."

She did not know what to say.

"And I wish all over again that they'd never ended. Well, they did. Not because Ava died — she didn't, not then — but because her eggs hatched. It's just about always a boy and a girl. Have I said that?"

"No, Dad. Not till now."

"Not always, but nearly. That's what it was for us. The girl...."

"Oh, Dad!" She squeezed his hand.

"The boy had wings. At first I thought he wasn't mine. He was just a little bit of a thing. You both were. Premies, the doctors would've called you. You could nurse, though, and you got bigger every day. When he was bigger, I could see he was mine after all. It was the same face I'd had, the face I'd seen in pictures my mother took, and he had my eye color.

"Bright blue."

"That's right. Their eyes are dark, or Ava's were."

"Like mine, Dad?"

"That's right. Just like yours, because it was you, Bea. You were that girl. I know you don't remember, but you were, and you didn't have any more wings than I did. Ava pretended she was happy with it, when it tore her up something awful. I could see the hurt under the smiles, and it just broke my heart."

"Benjy doesn't have wings, Dad." She tried to make her voice and words as gentle as she could. "I've seen him with his shirt off, seen him like that a lot of times, and he doesn't."

"Course not, Bea." The old man in the bed sounded a trifle impatient. "Benjy's Elsie's. Elsie's and mine. This's your full brother."

"My full brother?" She almost felt that she and her father were conversing in a dream.

"What I just said." The old man's eyes shut, one and then — perhaps five seconds after it — the other. She took his hand, warming it between her own and listening to his rasping breaths. Half an hour later, when she had nerved herself to speak, there was no reply.

She was still holding that hand when Raeburn came in with little Megan. Raeburn said, "How is he, honey?"

She sighed, and Raeburn repeated his question a trifle more loudly, this time without honey.

"He's gone," Bea whispered.

Raeburn looked at Megan, then back to Bea.

She sighed again. "She has to learn, and this is the lesson time. Megan, do you remember the toad you found in our yard?"

"All stiff." Megan nodded, her guarantee of her own truthfulness.

"Well, what happened to that toad has happened to Granddad. Come take his hand. He won't hurt you."

"He never done." The old man's cold hand was three times the size of Megan's warm and chubby ones.

"That's right," Bea said. "He never has and he never will. He's with the angels, darling, where he can tell God what a good girl you are."

Megan nodded again.

That night Bea — younger than Megan again — hid among leaves once more. Something huge paced the limb; footfalls more silent than sighs thundered over her mother's screams. Soon, very soon, it would find her.

She woke.

Raeburn was getting out of bed and searching for his slippers when she said, "Mama's dead."

He hugged her, and his voice was as gentle as it ever became. "It's Ace, honey." And then, feeling she did not understand. "It's your dad, Bea. Asa's passed on."

"And now," the funeral director intoned, "you may pass the coffin one by one to pay your final respects."

He was short and pudgy, with a bald head that looked like the old paint in the kitchen.

"One at a time, please, and we'll begin with the front row on this side."

She rose.

The thing in the coffin might have been a badly made waxwork of her father. My father, she wanted to say, was full of life. My father was a fighter, a man even Elsie's carping and dirt could not pull down.

A man who might have been telling the truth, even when Death stood beside his bed and his mind was clearly gone. A man who might really have been my father, though God knows Elsie was never my mother.

She turned away to go back to her seat. Somebody sat alone in the last row of the room of repose. Benjy? He did not look like Benjy, and certainly that big black coat — buttoned up indoors on this mild autumn day — did not look like something Benjy would wear anyplace.

She walked toward him, Raeburn and Megan momentarily forgotten. He rose at once, and her soft, "Please?" did nothing to slow his retreat.

He was tall, and clearly vigorous. Though he did not run and she trotted, she was handicapped by three-inch heels and gained only slowly. She was still ten strides behind, still pleading with him, when he turned onto a nameless suburban street. By the time she reached it he was gone, though the black raincoat he had worn lay empty on the sidewalk, half covering a pair of black shoes.

Moved by a premonition akin to dread, she looked up.

A bird of condor size threshed the air with eight-foot wings. When a puff of wind shook the treetops, it rose like a kite, trailing a swallow tail that might....

That could have been legs.

Someone saw Bea fall to her knees, watched her pound the concrete with futile fists as she wept and screamed, and called the police. Hours afterward, Raeburn was able to explain to a sympathetic sergeant that her father's funeral had been that day.



Nearly a year has passed since we last published a story by Mr. Finlay, so a word or two is in order for all you readers who have joined us recently. From his home in Columbus, Ohio, Mr. Finlay has been sending us unpredictable stories for most of this current decade. Sometimes his tales are purely fantastic (most notably in his stories about the human boy raised as a troll). Other times, he takes us into space, as he did with "The Seal Hunter" and "The Political Officer."

With his latest story, Mr. Finlay stays closer to home—specifically, the locale for this one is Little Limestone Island, a small town in the Great Lakes region of the U.S. Other stories set here have appeared in Strange Horizons magazine and in his story collection, Wild Things. This story offers an interesting look at a woman haunted by the past.

Passing Through

By Charles Coleman Finlay

ROBERTA BUMGARDNER didn't like the look of the young couple standing on the front porch. He was a black man, or an African-

American as she was supposed to call them these days, though his skin was more of a nutmeg brown; slender and small-boned, he had delicate hands and round glasses just small enough by a hair to avoid being comical. His golf shirt was casually unbuttoned at the throat. The woman with him — she had to be his wife, Roberta supposed, given the matching wedding bands, hers paired with an engagement ring containing a garish marquise diamond — was a cheerful, chubby woman, white, with curly shoulder-length blonde hair. Her skin was reddened by a day or two in the sun, and it looked like the sort of skin that stayed red or turned pink instead of tanning. Roberta didn't like the woman's cheerfulness. Nor the man's either. There was an impertinence in cheerfulness she found off-putting.

She pushed open the screen door, taking one small, deliberate step down to their level on the porch. The door slammed shut behind her.

Pasting on her second-best smile, she said, "Welcome to the Sullivan House Museum."

"Is there still time for a tour?" the man asked, half-opening his hand at the laminated white sign tacked up by the door. "You close in half an hour, right?"

"Don't fret yourself," Roberta said. The door creaked as she reopened it for them. "That's plenty of time to do the whole tour. Twice, if you like. Watch your step."

The man stood aside, gesturing his wife ahead. Their eyes met, and the sparkle in his eyes reflected in hers like stars shining on Lake Erie on a clear night. Roberta started her speech before he finished entering the hall.

"The Sullivan mansion was originally completed in 1853, of limestone quarried here on the island. During the Civil War, it was part of the prisoner of war camp for Confederate officers and the rear section burned down in 1864 from a kitchen fire. Colonel Donegal Sullivan, who served with 123rd Ohio Volunteers, rebuilt it after the war."

While the cheerful couple poked around the foyer and the parlor — bending over to ooh at the antique doilies covering dark end tables, touching the wood railing on the center stair as if it needed all the delicacy of a baby's skin, and leaning back to gaze at the wood vault of the ceiling as if it were the Sistine Chapel — Roberta rushed through her spiel: the history of Little Limestone Island as an Indian — or rather Native American, she quickly corrected herself — hunting ground; the arrival of the Sullivan family in 1832 when they were looking for a place to escape the cholera epidemic in Cleveland; the story of the house, from mansion to hotel to its rescue from the wrecking ball by the formation of the island historical society. She showed them all the open rooms downstairs and had twelve minutes to spare. The upstairs wasn't suitable for showing yet.

"Do you have any questions?" she asked, and was annoyed when the couple laughed.

"So is it true that the mansion was a stop on the underground railroad?" the man asked.

"Yes, they would hang a light down on the dock," she said, with a vague wave of her hand toward the aged boathouse across the road from

the front door, "if it was safe to cross over. Then the runaways would be taken north across the lake to Pelee Island in Canada."

"Are there any stories about those runaways?" the man asked, and the woman chipped in with, "Are there any ghost stories?"

"She likes ghost stories," the man explained.

"No," Roberta said brusquely. "The runaways didn't leave any stories behind. And there are no ghost stories." She clapped her hands and held them to her chest. "So. What about the two of you? Where are you from?"

Their names were William and Carol Hughes, "Like Langston Hughes," William said, as though that should mean something to Roberta, "only we're not related, as far as I can tell." They were from Columbus. He was an engineer. She was a kindergarten teacher. They were celebrating their anniversary with a weekend getaway. There was something so perfectly ordinary about them that Roberta almost began to like them.

"And what brought you here?" she asked.

"Oh, we were just passing through," William said.

Roberta's second-best smile flipped instantly into her best frown, and she checked her watch impatiently. Regrets were offered, apologies exchanged, and she showed them out the door and locked up.

From the back door, she watched them stroll hand-in-hand down the street toward the restaurants downtown. She wondered what they were trying to hide from her. As if anyone since the runaway slaves passed *through* Limestone Island! It was a cul-de-sac, a crawdad trap, someplace people found themselves stuck in. A place people ran away to, to hide from something. Even time didn't reach the island as fast as it did other places. When she came there in the 1950s, it was still like the 1920s. The '50s didn't arrive until the '70s, and there was still some bit of the '70s clinging around yet.

"Passing through," she said to herself. "That's just a bunch of damned foolishness."

If she weren't already wearing her best frown, it would have shown up then, as an expression of her sharp disapproval of herself. She wasn't the sort of lady who swore. Not much, anyway.

The ghost was waiting for her when she drove up the short driveway and parked outside the too-small garage attached to her house.

The Sullivan mansion, with its Confederate deaths, stillborn babies (to Colonel Sullivan's second wife, after the war), and the hotel guest who committed suicide, didn't have a single ghost; but Roberta's house, a two-bedroom ranch that she and her husband Walter built in 1981, did. The ghost wasn't there when they built it, but showed up a year or two before Walter's mother died, about the time all their friends' parents were passing on, about the time that Walter and Roberta noticed they were now the elder generation. Which might have been enough in itself to make anybody see ghosts.

As soon as Roberta opened the car door, she felt an electricity in the air that made the hair stand up on the back of her neck and arms. The muscles knotted in her shoulders. Ignoring the presence so as not to encourage it, she marched around the yew bushes, almost in need of trimming, and into the front door, which, for once, she bothered to lock. She waited a moment, holding her breath, but nothing happened. Which was often the case. The ghost bided his time.

She unlocked the door again. Betty Frary was coming over, and they were going to go do some work at the church.

After hanging up her scarf and jacket, and exchanging her shoes for slippers, she made herself a piece of toast so lightly browned it was scarcely toast at all. She tidied up and hurried into the safety of her bedroom, where she sat at her vanity.

She took a jar of the pearlized face powder and dusted a thin line of it across the doorway to keep the ghost out. She wasn't sure why it worked, but it did.

She sat down, dabbed moisturizer at the corners of her eyes to fight the crow's feet, and reapplied the Revlon heather eyeshadow that drew the most attention to the flecks of blue in her brown-blue eyes. Her eyes were her best feature, especially now that her blonde hair had gone completely gray. It had been more brown than blonde anyway, the color Walter disparagingly called dishwater blonde, though he liked it just fine and didn't mean to hurt her.

Out in the kitchen, a cabinet door opened and closed. Then another opened and slammed, hard enough to rattle dishes.

Roberta tilted her head side to side in front of the vanity's mirror, touching up her eyebrows and adding blush to her cheeks.

Then a drawer creaked open in the kitchen over in the corner where she had her desk. She paused to listen.

The vanity was part of a three-piece bedroom set that she'd bought with money she saved up from working cashier at the Water Street Market back in 1966. It was early in the year — after the race riots that summer, Walter refused to take her back to Cleveland again, "them people are *animals*," he'd said, and they went to Toledo to do their shopping instead. Walter developed a deep but casual hatred of blacks, especially after the Civil Rights movement started. She sat beside him on the day that Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated and heard him say, "Well, he got what he deserved." But she'd seen the bedroom set at Higbee's Department Store before all that, when she and Walter went to downtown Cleveland for the Christmas displays, and she made him borrow Whitey Dunn's truck to pick it up for her. He'd balked at first, but once she set her mind to something she was too stubborn to change course and he'd given in. The vanity was her pride and joy, even though it wasn't solid maple, only covered with a thin veneer.

More drawers slid open in the desk. Roberta had been going through her papers and keepsakes. Without any children or other family, there was no reason to keep most of it, and she'd been systematically throwing things away. The ghost was looking for something around her desk.

She jumped up and ran to the doorway in spite of herself.

"Now you knock that off right now!"

Everything fell silent.

When she sat down again, pulling her seat up to the mirror, she glanced over to the door and noticed the powder across the entrance was scattered.

Her heart began to pound. A wind, smelling like her father's boot polish, swept through the room. Something took Roberta by the collar and tugged her gently toward the door.

She twisted frantically until she got away from it, falling on the floor, yelling, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" or possibly "Go to hell, damn you, go straight to hell!"

The presence let her go.

Out in the living room, the front door opened.

"Hello!"

Roberta's heart beat even faster. "Good evening, Betty," she said, grabbing a rag and quickly wiping the powder off the floor. "Make yourself at home. I'm just freshening up."

Her hair was in disarray, curled into tangles. She brushed it out quickly, smoothed out her clothes, touched up her face. She found Betty in the kitchen, at her desk. Betty was a few years older than Roberta, almost eighty, a few pounds heavier, her hair a few shades grayer. Her rounded shoulders were warmed by a navy blue sweater she wore even in summer.

"What's this?" Betty asked. Roberta's metal box, the one that held her valuable documents, was sitting open. The key she kept hidden in the sugar bowl lay beside it.

"That's nothing," Roberta said, rushing over to close it.

Betty said, "No, I mean this picture. It was sitting out on your desk." She held up a black-and-white photo that was almost sixty-five years old. Roberta stopped, reached for it, pulled her hand back. It showed a family of blacks in front of a farmhouse, a mother and father and four children, ranging in age from about ten to teens, all in bare feet.

"Oh, that," she said. "It's something for the museum. Somebody found it. We're trying to determine its place in island history."

Betty snorted. "That's not from the island. You remember when that woman had her house for sale out on the point, and she had all those pictures and statues of little black children, those — what do you call them?"

"Pickaninnies," Roberta offered. The picture bobbed in Betty's hand, just out of her reach.

"Yes! The whole house was decorated in pickanninnies and watermelons. She had the watermelon rug, and the watermelon pitcher, and all those cute little children — "

"I remember." She aborted another grab at the photograph.

"And the realtor from over in Sandusky, he told her she had to redecorate if she wanted to sell it, 'cause it was too offensive." She tossed the picture down. "I didn't see anything offensive, just country decorating. It's all that political correct B.S., pardon my language. You ready to go?"

Roberta put the picture back in the box and locked it, then slid the box

back in its drawer. On Friday evenings, she and Betty stuffed the weekly church announcements, run off on a photocopier, into the standard, preprinted bulletins.

"Yes," she said, touching her hair, smoothing her blouse. "I'm quite ready."



OF COURSE, THERE WAS NO GHOST.

Ghosts were just stories. Walter never believed in ghosts. The only time he thought he saw the ghost in the house, it turned out he was having a stroke, a bad one, and during the winter, when the ferries weren't running but the lake ice wasn't thick enough to drive on yet either, and they had to bring a helicopter over from the mainland just to get a doctor to look at him. He was never really all there again after that, those last couple years.

By Saturday morning, Roberta convinced herself that Betty had found and opened the box. Betty always was a bit of a snoop. But no harm done. Besides, it was a beautiful Saturday morning in July, with the breeze off the lake blowing fresh air through all the open windows in the house. Roberta would not believe in ghosts on such a perfect day.

After breakfast, and a load of laundry, and straightening up around the house, Roberta prepared to take her daily walk. She wore a long-sleeved white shirt, buttoned at the cuffs and collar, tucked into her khaki pants. When she looked at the liver spots on the backs of her pale hands, she missed the days when a lady could still wear cotton gloves in public. Instead, she slathered them with sunscreen. SPF 50. Not all progress was bad. She adjusted her wide-brimmed straw hat and tied it firmly under her chin, checking it twice in the hall mirror. She left the house with a smile on her face.

Every day, Roberta walked a 3.1-mile route that started and ended at her doorstep. Turning right, she set off down Church Street, passing the plain whiteboard Catholic church across from the town playground and going all the way down to the big stone Methodist church where the street dead-ended at the corner of Market. Turning right again, she headed up the hill, past the cemetery, toward the island's school.

She and Walter didn't have a church wedding when they married back in 1953. There hadn't been time. In fact, their whole courtship had lasted

less than six weeks. She told Walter she was twenty, but she'd barely been eighteen. He was twenty-three, and had come to Cleveland looking for work in the factories. Roberta was working in the Mendlsohn and Newman Cigar factory, pasting labels onto boxes. Walter had come to the city to try to get a job at the Ford factory in Brookpark, but he'd ended up doing masonry work instead. The two of them met at a dance club on Euclid, where neither of them was interested in dancing, Walter because he was shy and self-conscious and Roberta because she didn't like the way it made people lose their self-control. When Walter told her he was going back home to the island to take a job that had opened up in the quarry, she asked him to marry her. She told him she had a problem that meant they could never have children, and he had wanted her to go see doctors, but she said she already had and smoothed it over. They were married by the end of the week.

Walter's family hadn't approved at first, since they'd never met her, and it was all done in a hurry; after ten or twenty years they came to tolerate her well enough. Roberta visited Walter's mother every day right up until the morning she found her cold in bed instead of brewing coffee for breakfast. Roberta's family wasn't an issue. She had moved to Cleveland to get away from her family, and marrying Walter took her even farther away, where she'd never have to see them again. It worked out well for both of them.

Or at least it worked out. Walter was moody, downright gloomy, didn't talk to anybody much except when he was drinking and then only about two-thirds into a drunk, because after that he grew sullen again. But he was a hard worker, and an honest man, and he didn't drink often, and when he did he was a good time from maybe his second beer to around his eighth or ninth. Just the best. He could make her forget everything bad in the world and be happy then.

If she went on straight past the school, the road would curve around by the beach and go on to the remains of the quarry where Walter worked. But she had never had children with Walter, and she didn't want to go past the school. So she crossed over to Rosey. She was halfway down the road, lifting her hand to wave at the approaching car, a gray Lexus she didn't recognize. Limestone Island was small town; everyone pretended they knew each other even when they didn't.

The car slowed as it came beside Roberta, and the window rolled down. It was the couple from the mansion.

"Hello," the husband said, still smiling that unsettling contented smile.

"We thought we'd take a drive around the island," the woman said, leaning across her husband's lap.

"Well, that'll take you all of five minutes," Roberta said. "A day as pretty as today, you should've walked."

They both laughed, and the wife patted her stomach and said, "I'm due in two months. My feet hurt too much to walk that far." She smiled.

Roberta took a step away from the car, stopped, turned back. She frowned, and started to say, "Won't that be a burden for the child?" but what came out of her mouth was, "Well, congratulations to you. Have a good day."

Then she hurried on. She had to finish her walk. Those people really had no excuse for coming to the island and interrupting her perfectly good day.

She made it all the way back into town without her mood improving, along Water Street, and even up the single row of stores, past the Island Market where she worked on and off as a cashier from 1963 to 1986, when Denise Schott sold it to Allan Dunn and his wife after her husband Rod had a heart attack while he was fishing and fell off his boat and drowned.

Glancing at the glass windows, taped over with their sun-faded ads for Pepsi and ice cream sandwiches and lottery tickets, Roberta saw a shadow reflected in the glass a half step behind her own image. She jumped, startled, heart pounding, spinning around, but there was no one nearby on the sidewalk beside her.

The ghost had never left the house before. There was no ghost.

Nancy Younts, standing behind the register, gave a tourist his change, brushed the hair back from her forehead, and waved through the glass at Roberta. She waved back. Before the tourist could come out the door, she started walking again.

She saw the shadow jump after her in the reflection, and she felt a shove in her back. The bell on the door jingled as the tourist stepped out and paused to stare.

Roberta pressed her hand over her heart and continued walking. She

hadn't reached the second house past the miniature golf course when she felt the shove again. Then invisible hands were tugging at her hat, trying to pull it from her head. She spun, but no one was there. She thought it was the wind, but the flag hung limp on the pole outside the city building. The hands began to fumble at the knot under her chin. She squeezed it tight in her fist, just before it came undone. Hat askew, she hurried toward her house only two blocks away.

The hands clutched at her arm, and she tried to slap them away. The button tore from the cuff of her left sleeve, pulling it halfway to her elbow.

She ran inside, not even sure if she'd completely shut the front door once she retreated to the bedroom and locked herself in. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she smoothed the front of her pants over and over again until her hands stopped shaking.

There simply was no ghost.



ON SUNDAY morning, Roberta drove out to the point and picked up Betty Frary. They made it to the Methodist Church a half hour before the ten o'clock service so they could get a good parking space out in front.

Walter had been Catholic, and Roberta had gone to mass with him at St. Michael's for the forty-one years of their marriage. She never claimed to be Catholic, and never converted, but most of the priests seemed to recognize her as one of their congregation, and Father Timothy offered her communion during the 1970s and '80s. As soon as Walter died, Roberta went down the street to the United Methodist Church. It was nearly the same as the Methodist Church she grew up in as a child, and she wanted to make peace with her faith as she saw her own death approaching.

After the service, when she and Betty were cleaning up the discarded bulletins from the pews, Betty said, "Did you see that couple in here this morning?"

Roberta said, "What?"

"That couple. You know, what do they call it, jungle love? Sitting in the back."

She had seen them, and pretended they weren't there. It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair they kept showing up wherever Roberta went. "Oh. Them.

They came by the museum when I was volunteering there on Friday. He's an engineer."

Betty leaned over and whispered. "Women like those men because they have the big — " She nodded meaningfully.

"Betty!" Also a whisper. Roberta glanced up, but the minister was still shaking hands with stragglers in the narthex.

Betty snatched the stack of bulletins from Roberta's hand and crossed over to clean the last few pews on the other side of the aisle. "That's why that pretty blonde girl married what's his name, the one that killed her. O. J. Simpson."

Roberta followed Betty. "They're just a regular couple. She's going to have a baby."

"I don't think they ought to mix that way. It's such a burden on the children." She shook her head. "But some women like jungle love, that's all I'm saying."

Roberta crumpled a bulletin in her fist. She was angry at the couple for coming to the island and disrupting the careful pattern of her life. She was angry at Betty for talking about them. Lips tight together, voice hushed, she said, "That's just prejudice."

"It's not prejudice if it's true. Hello, Pastor Kelley, how're you this morning?"

Roberta jumped, put on her best smile, and hid the crumpled bulletin at her side.

"Bless you for a kind heart, Betty," the pastor said, smile forming deep grooves in his cheeks. "And you too, Roberta. Thank you, ladies, for all the good work you do."

Roberta said it was nothing and they told the pastor they'd see him next Friday. He exited the door behind the altar, and Betty and Roberta stepped out the front of the church. Tall green trees lined the street, and the houses on either side behind the trees were all eighty or so years old. Aside from the air, which smelled like the lake, it reminded Roberta of the town she'd grown up in.

"Colored people is still just people," she said, more than half to herself, and surprised to hear herself saying it.

"My father called them Coloreds too. He knew Colonel Sullivan, I ever tell you that? He said the Colonel wore a white carnation in his lapel,

every day. Well, except when he called them niggers, but that's just what people called them back then."

"I've heard all that before, about a thousand times," Roberta said sharply. She still had the crumpled bulletin in her hand. She flung it down.

"When they were in season, I mean," Betty said. "The carnations." She hobbled down the steps and over to Roberta's car, leaving Roberta stranded on the church steps.

Little Limestone Island was a cul-de-sac, a dead end. No one ended up there by accident. Not even a ghost.

Roberta dropped Betty off at her house and made excuses not to stay for lunchmeats because she didn't feel like fighting Betty's horde of cats and the smell of all those litterboxes turned her stomach. She drove once around the island, without finding a reason to stop, before she went home again. She went around to the back door and let herself in, leaving the screen door open to cool the house.

The metal box sat open on her desk. The photograph sat beside the box. Nothing else was disturbed.

The photograph was the oldest thing she owned. She had never shared it with anyone, not even Walter, who had only seen it once, by accident, just before his stroke.

She picked it up and walked over to the sink. Opening the cabinet door beneath the sink, she slowly and deliberately tore the picture into tiny pieces and dropped them into the trash. Her hands were trembling by the time she was through.

Making a pot of coffee to calm her nerves, she discovered she was out of half-and-half. She poured a cup and reluctantly sipped it black. When she turned to lock her box and put it safely away, she saw the photograph.

All the pieces had been reassembled and left there on her desk, among the bills to pay.

For a moment, she thought she too was having a stroke. Her heart pounded as if it were being pulled apart, and pain threatened to split her head. She sat down at the desk and leaned her face on her hand, pinching the bridge of her nose. A sigh fell out of her mouth, almost like a sob, and the worst of the pain went with it. She straightened her back and wiped the edges of her eyes with her fingertip.

"Is it you?" she asked, not looking around for the ghost. She placed her fingertip on the father's face, his eyes turned half away from the camera toward his children, and moved that crumpled square apart from the others. "Is that you there?"

The silence that answered her was like the silence that answered her parents' letters when she moved away to Cleveland.

She put her finger on the mother's face. The two older sisters. The brother. In the black-and-white photo, their features looked unmistakably black, no matter how light-skinned they were. Back in the day when "one drop of blood" made you a full-blooded Negro.

She waited for the touch of the ghost. But there was nothing.

Her fingertip edged the piece with the youngest girl, her features blurred, away from the others. Her father's eyes had been turning toward her, she realized, warning her not to be so restless, telling her to be patient.

Her father was a deacon in the African Methodist Episcopal Church over in the Union County seat. They lived outside the tiny town of Jefferson Corner, Ohio, where he was a farmer and a mechanic, but he'd gone to Wilberforce University for two years, and prided himself on being an educated man. He used to read to her from W.E.B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folks*.

"How beautiful he was," her father read, "with his olive-tinted flesh and dark gold ringlets, his eyes of mingled blue and brown, his perfect little limbs, and the soft voluptuous roll which the blood of Africa had moulded into his features!" DuBois's son had died from a treatable illness: the black doctors in Atlanta wouldn't treat him because he was too white, and there were laws against that, and the white doctors wouldn't treat him because his parents were too black.

Her heart beat at a normal pace again. After another sip of coffee, her head throbbed less. She scooped all the pieces of the photograph into the cup of her hand and went over to the sink. She flipped the switch for the garbage disposal, turned the faucet handle, and dropped one piece after another into the drain, listening to the grind and rush of water until she was sure they were completely destroyed.

She poured the rest of her coffee after it.

When she was sixteen, she had taken a fourth of the money from her

parents' mattress. Blacks still couldn't keep money in banks in those days. Her rightful inheritance, she told herself. And then, like a prodigal daughter, she ran off to Cleveland to pass for white, because Columbus was too close and her brother worked there. When even Cleveland seemed too close, she'd married Walter and gone to the island with him. In her own community, Walter would have been below her — in looks, intelligence, prospects. But he was her one-way bridge across the color line. If even one person found out her secret, everything in her life would've come to ruins. That was why she never dared have children with him, in case they looked too black. She remembered what a relief it was when she finally hit menopause, and how much she had cried.

"It's not fair," she said aloud, in case the ghost was listening. She sounded petulant, even to herself, like the ten-year-old girl in the photograph, too restless to sit still while the picture was taken. "It's not fair for the world to change that much."

She went and sat in the living room, waiting for the photograph to reappear, for something, anything. What did it mean that her whole life had been lived as a lie? In a marriage she didn't have to make, in a place she didn't need to live, with the children she didn't dare to have?

The photograph was the last link to her past. With the photograph destroyed, nobody would ever be able to find out. Not Betty. Not anyone.

When nothing happened, and no ghost spoke to her, she said, softly, "Well, go to hell then." Or, possibly, "I'm sorry."

It was late afternoon when she roused herself for her daily walk. Long sleeves, hat, and sunscreen, same as always. She was on the stretch of Water Street between the mansion and the docks when she saw a gray Lexus waiting in line for the ferry. The couple sat on the rocks beside it, looking out over the water, holding hands. Roberta felt a gladness they were leaving, that she'd never have to see them again.

But then the ghost put a hand in her back and shoved her gently off her well-worn path. He took her hand in his, and led her along like a little girl. Her hand lifted, in a way that might be mistaken for a wave. Before she knew exactly what she was doing, she heard herself saying, "William, Carol. Mr. and Mrs. Hughes."

They stopped mid-laughter, turning, looking up at her in surprise. She

felt the ghost shove her one step closer, and then, with a cold shiver, like wind off lake ice, it was passing through her and gone.

What she did next, in this moment, the next time she saw Betty, the rest of her life, was up to her.

"Yes?" William said, and Carol said, "What's up?"

The orange bulk of the ferry was just leaving the Sandusky shore. It wouldn't reach this side for twenty minutes. "I remembered a story to tell you, about a runaway and a ghost," Roberta said, and sat down on the rocks to tell it for the first time before they could say no. ¶



JACK & JILL & ATTORNEY



PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

A Black Hole Ate My Homework

"Intelligent design posits that biological life is so complex that it must have been designed by an intelligent source. Its adherents say that they refrain from identifying the designer, and that it could even be aliens or a time traveler."

—*The New York Times*, December 21, 2005

THE students filtered into my classroom, seemingly a bright and lively bunch. Many of them proudly wore IDU garb, sweatshirts, track pants, caps, and the like, bearing the crest of Intelligent Design University: a giant celestial hand whose forefinger was extended to poke and stir a globe of the Earth. Seeing these freshmen for the first time on this opening day of the fall semester, I was moved wistfully to speculate about which ones would be able to master the tricky essentials of this required introductory course — going on to a stellar four years in

their chosen fields of study — and which ones would fail to make the grade, exhibiting the intractable, congenital rationality that would exclude them from sampling the wisdom gathered here at IDU.

Once the students had settled down and were regarding me with bright, curious gazes, I introduced myself and the course.

"Welcome, students. My name is Professor Ackerwitz, and this is Stefna! Thinking 101."

I waited for any students who had wandered in by mistake to jump up and dash out for their real destination, but no one did. A good sign.

"This course, as you all know, is a prerequisite for your continued studies here at IDU. It's graded solely on a pass/fail basis, so there's no need to heap on the extra-credit assignments. We're just concerned that you show a minimal proficiency in the basic mode of thinking which is the core of all disciplines here at IDU.

"I realize that this is a very

large section — but then so are the other three. My attendance print-out lists over one hundred enrollees, and my colleagues are equally swamped. But there should still be plenty of time for personal interaction, both in the classroom and outside. You'll find my office hours posted on my webpage.

"For this first hour, I thought I'd simply spell out the essence of Stefna! Thinking, outline the topics we'll be covering, and take some questions. Does that sound all right?"

A wordless murmuring and general head-bobbing signaled me to continue.

"Very well. The core approach of Stefna! Thinking can perhaps best be summed up by a famous quote: 'Not only is the universe stranger than we imagine — it is stranger than we *can* imagine.' In other words, Occam's Razor has no place in your intellectual toolbox while you're attending IDU. Any aspect of creation, of the physical universe and its daily workings, is presumed to have a highly esoteric and recomplicated origin, but one which is nonetheless capable of being speculated on wildly, almost ad infinitum in fact, by the properly trained mind."

I paused and looked around the room intently, seeing plenty

of furrowed brows and note-taking hands. They seemed to be internalizing my words well, but I knew that the rocky passages still to come had thrown many a paddler from their intellectual kayak.

"The role of the student at IDU," I resumed, "is to cultivate his or her mind to such a state that dozens of exotic theories, seemingly improbable to the untrained, straitjacketed mind, yet possessing a thin veneer of scientific plausibility, can be offered for nearly any phenomenon which conventional science reduces to but a single clear and provable cause.

"Now, this task looks very hard at first. And it would be, if we had to invent such theories solely on our own. But luckily, we do not. We stand on the shoulders of giants, those thousands of men and women who have written science fiction over the past two centuries.

"Science fiction writers have spent their whole lives conjuring up wild and way-out scenarios that might underlie the workings of the universe. We here at IDU have codified their work and turned it into a methodology, a way of thinking that allows you, the student, to overturn any scientific consensus and replace it with your own explanations, for your own purposes.

"Are you following me so far?"

I waited expectantly while the students looked back and forth among themselves, waiting for someone to summon up the courage to answer. At last, a trim blond woman raised her hand. I gave her the go-ahead to speak.

"You're saying, Professor Ack-erwitz, that by studying the novels and stories of the science fiction genre, we can adapt their far-out speculations for ideological goals, to reconfigure the public perception of reality...?"

A bright girl. I made a mental note to keep close track of her progress.

"Yes, precisely," I said. "The harmless thought experiments tossed off by these dabblers can be repurposed to support practically any partisan program. One vital quibble, however, with your answer, young lady. We will not be reading any actual stories and novels in this class. Those works are too long and too full of extraneous material, much of it unsettling and almost seditious. We have abstracted and refined the core ideas of the genre, catalogued and organized them into textbook form. You'll find this material available in the campus bookstore."

A beefy fellow who looked like

he'd make a fine addition to IDU's trophy-winning football team said, "But Professor, why do we need to take a special course in this stuff? These ideas are all around us every day! You tell someone that the only way *Apollo Thirteen* coulda got back to Earth safe was that passing aliens pulled them home with a tractor beam, and everyone knows just what you mean already!"

I smiled in the properly condescending manner. It would do no good to let this attitude take hold.

"Certainly, the general public has a vague idea of the precepts of Stefal Thinking, mostly derived from watered-down media representations of these ideas. Convincing them that dinosaurs and cavemen cohabited or that the Greenhouse Effect is caused by a malign race of beings inside the Hollow Earth is a slam-dunk! But our mission here at IDU is to become so sophisticated in our arguments that we are able to convert — or at least disturb the belief systems of — important movers and shakers educated at conventional colleges and universities. To enlist politicians and actual scientists on our side, we must master the higher levels of Stefal Thinking, not just the primitive ones we've all been exposed to since we

could watch our first episode of *Star Trek*.

"Therefore, you will soon be embarking on a close study of the theories put forth by such crackpot visionaries as A. E. van Vogt, Eric Frank Russell, Philip K. Dick and Rudy Rucker. Names as far removed as Charles Stross and Hugo Gernsback, James Blish and A. Merritt, John W. Campbell and H. P. Lovecraft will become as familiar to you as your parents'. My goal for all of you is that by the time the end of this semester rolls around, you should all be able to supply a dozen original fanciful and contradictory explanations for Newton's Laws in less time than it takes to write his equations on a chalkboard!"

Spontaneous applause broke out then, and I basked in the warm glow of having broken through to so many young, impressionable minds. But to maintain the proper

level of seriousness and discipline, I laid out their first assignment.

"Make sure you go to the store and get your textbooks today. I'll be giving a quiz about Dean Machines the next time we meet."

A communal groan met this announcement. The students began assembling their backpacks and sweaters for departure with a mixed air of resignation and excitement. But before any of them could exit, the sharp-witted blond woman asked a last question.

"Professor, what if between now and the next class our solar system enters a portion of the galaxy where the functioning of neurons is degraded in a marked but inexplicable fashion? Could we postpone the quiz?"

I could feel my face light up with pleasure. "Young lady, I'm going to make you my teaching assistant starting right now!" ☞

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Our latest offering from the prolific Mr. Reed is one of his darkest, a vision of the future with a sharp edge to it. So perhaps it's wise to take a bit of the edge off with Mr. Reed's latest biographical note: he says, "I am doing a great deal of art work lately...I am being called upon to draw clown faces and cats and dogs for a four-year-old whose own artistic talents are beginning to outstrip her father's. Which isn't saying much at all, the truth be known."

Show Me Yours

By Robert Reed

SHE WEARS A BLACK FELT ROBE long enough to cover her bare knees and pale pink socks pulled over her ankles; her calves are white and freshly shaved and her shins

are even whiter and nicked in two places by razor blades. A red belt is cinched tight, making her waist appear narrow and her hips broad. She isn't a tall woman. By most measures, she is slender, though the body has a roundness that marks five stubborn pounds — pounds sure to grow over time. She isn't lovely in the traditional ways, but youth and a good complexion help. Her fine black hair is long enough to kiss her shoulders; her eyes appear dark and exceptionally large. On stocking feet, she stands in the middle of a long hallway, her head tilted forward while her mouth opens and closes and again opens. The door to her left — the door she came out of — is slightly ajar. She pulls it shut now, applying pressure until the old latch catches with a sudden sharp click. Then she stares at the opposite door, drifting closer to it, listening. The loudest sound in the world is her soft, slow breathing. But then some little noise catches her attention, and on tiptoes, she glides down to the end of the hallway, into the only room in the apartment where a light still burns.

Metal moves, and the second door pops open. At that moment, the young woman is sitting on a hard chair, her back to the kitchen table. She watches a young man step out into the hallway. He wears jeans and nothing else, and judging by his manner, he wants something. He examines the door she just closed, then drifts a few steps to his left, finding nothing but the darkened living room. That most definitely is not what he needs. So he finally turns in her direction and notices her sitting alone in the kitchen, sitting with her legs crossed, illuminated from behind by the weak bulb above the sink.

"The john?" he whispers.

She nods and tilts her head.

The bathroom is beside the kitchen. He starts to fumble for the switch, closing the door all but the last little bit before clicking the light on.

The girl doesn't move, except to scratch the back of an ear and then drop the same finger down the front of her neck, tugging at the warmth of the old black felt. That slight pressure pulls open the robe enough to expose the tops of her breasts. While she waits, a seemingly endless stream of urine echoes inside the toilet bowl. Then comes the hard flush and the light goes off, and the man steps back into the hallway. He already wears a big smile, as if he spent his time in the bathroom rehearsing this moment. "So you're the roommate," he says.

She says, "Hi."

He steps into the kitchen, stops. "Did we wake you?"

"No."

"Good," he says.

She leans against the hard back of the chair, her chest lifting. "No, you didn't wake me." Her voice is deep for a woman and pleasantly rough. Then she shows him a half-wink, asking, "What do you think?"

He almost laughs. "Think about what?"

She doesn't answer.

He takes another little step forward.

"About my roommate," she says. "What do you think?"

The man scratches his bare navel and then his sternum, smiling as he phrases his response. "Sweet."

"My roommate is?"

Again, he says, "Sweet."

Which makes her laugh, and she stands up now and runs one hand through her black hair and flips her head twice and says, "You aren't."

"I'm not what?"

"You know what I mean," she says.

He is barefoot and shirtless and maybe in his middle twenties — a fit, strong young man with pale hair and abdominal muscles and jeans that could be tighter but not much so. "I'm not what?" he asks again.

"Fooling me," she says.

"No!"

"Not at all."

He shakes his head. "I didn't know I was trying to."

She says nothing.

He gestures over his shoulder. "She's sleeping."

"Is she?"

He doesn't answer.

"Sleep is good," she allows.

He watches her face, her body.

Again she uses her index finger, touching herself beneath her pale neck before pulling down, slowly dividing the robe until the inner faces of her breasts show in that gloomy yellow light. She is well-built and naked under the robe and her smile is girlish and warm and her deep rough voice says, "Show me yours, and I'll show you mine."

The young man takes a deep breath and holds it.

"No?" she asks.

"Maybe," he says.

"Maybe is the same as no," she says. "If you think about it."

"How's that?"

"Because every 'no' is just a maybe. It's attached to something you haven't gotten around to doing yet."

"Okay," he says.

She waits.

He puts a hand to his mouth, for an instant.

"Are you going to show me?" she asks.

"Why not?"

"Okay then."

With both hands, he unbuttons his jeans and unzips them and opens them until he is thoroughly exposed.

She studies nothing but his face.

"Now you," he mutters.

Very quickly, she pulls open the robe and then closes it again, in a blur, her face not quite smiling while she does it.

The young man blinks for a moment, as if trying to decide what he saw. Then he yanks up his pants and zips them.

"Do you hear her?" she asks.

He doesn't look back. He doesn't even blink now, watching her. With his face changing — smiling but with a grim, determined quality about the mouth and eyes — he says, "No, I don't hear anything. Nothing at all."

Just the same, he puts a finger to his mouth and turns abruptly, slipping back into the roommate's bedroom.

SHE WAITS NOW, counting to five. Then on tiptoes, she moves back down the hallway, balancing speed with stealth. The house is old and a floorboard groans, but not too loudly. The door has been closed but not quite latched. She hears someone moving; a light shows beneath the door. Somebody says a few soft words — the young man asks a question, judging by the tone. But no answer comes. Standing with her head tilted forward, the girl breathes through her nose, big eyes dancing and her mouth pressed tiny as her right hand turns the old glass knob, lifting the workings until she can push at the door without making much noise.

The young man stands beside a narrow bed — a woman's bed with a headboard made of iron and a flowery bedspread pulled against the wall and embroidered pillows stacked haphazardly on the floor. With considerable care, he holds a long bare foot in the crook of one arm. With a fingertip, he brushes at the foot's sole, working to elicit a reflexive flinch. Nothing happens. The woman on the bed is naked, lying on her stomach, her face turned toward the watching girl. Like the door, her eyes are just a little open. But nothing seems to register in her mind. When the man drops the foot, the bare leg collapses. When he slides his hand over her rump and between her legs, she doesn't react. And when he fishes a lighter out of a back pocket and makes a tall flame and holds it close to the

dreamy, drugged eyes, she does nothing to show that she sees anything at all.

Satisfied, he straightens and reaches for the lamp.

The girl in the black robe backs away from the door as the light goes out. Then she moves to the opposite end of the brief hallway, into the darkened living room, sitting on an old upholstered chair. She breathes hard now, even when she only sits. Nearly a minute passes. Her dimly lit face is a little wet with perspiration and her mouth is open, gulping at the air. When the man appears, she says nothing. She watches him return to the kitchen, watches him look around for a moment before glancing into the open bathroom. Has she slipped out of the apartment? He must be asking himself that question. Then he decides to investigate the other bedroom, giving the wooden door a little rap before putting his hand on the knob.

"Here," she calls out.

He jumps, just slightly. Then he steps into the living room, his face obscured by shadow but something in his posture implying a large, consuming smile. Quietly, he says, "Hey."

"What are you thinking?" she asks.

He shakes his head, laughing softly. "Guess."

"What's funny?"

"You."

She says nothing.

"Your roommate...she told me you don't like men that much...."

"She said that?"

"Just now," he lies.

"Some men are nice," she says. "On the right occasion, I might."

"Really?"

She crosses her pink socks.

"Hey," he says. "Want a drink?"

"Maybe."

"What do you have?"

"Whatever you find," she says.

He acts satisfied, even smug. With a quick walk, he returns to the kitchen. A new light comes on when he opens the refrigerator, and there is the musical clink of bottles and the woosh of seals being broken. Then

comes a pause, and he returns with the two beers held in one hand. One bottle is foaming slightly, while his free hand pushes into the front pocket of his jeans.

She breathes deeply and says, "Thanks," as she takes the foamy beer. "No problem."

She sets the beer on the old carpet between her pink socks. "If you want," she says, "turn on a light."

He fumbles with a floor lamp until the switch clicks once, the bulb glowing at its weakest setting. Then he looks at her for a long moment before saying, "Let's do that game again."

"Show me yours?"

"Yeah."

She nods but then says, "I don't know." She picks up her beer and takes a long drink. "Maybe later."

"Maybe is the same thing as no. Is that right?"

"Good job," she replies.

"Got any other lessons for me?"

"If you want to hear them."

He settles on the nearest chair, on its edge, staring at her robe and the pale, razor-nicked legs. "Yeah, sure."

"Well, first of all, there's no such word as 'sure.'" Grinning at the floor between them, she says, "Nothing is ever sure, or certain, or guaranteed."

"Never?"

"Not in my experience," she reports, taking another long sip of the beer. "You can never know the full consequences of anything you do. Not before you do it. And most of the time, not even afterwards."

The young man leans back in his chair, smiling at everything.

"Suppose it's fifty years from tonight," she says.

"Oh, yeah?"

"Imagine you're an old man looking back. What do you see? Fifty years later, and if you had to describe the consequences of your actions...if you had to explain your life to others...how would you do it?"

"Know what?" he says. "You're just a little bit weird."

She doesn't respond.

"Not that weird is a bad thing." He drinks part of his beer. "I don't know. I guess I'd say, 'In my life, everybody had some fun.'"

"Fun?" She takes a last long drink and sets the bottle out of the way.
"Is that what you call it?"

He shrugs. Laughs.

"Fifty years," she repeats. "It's going to be a different world. Full of changes, rich with possibilities. I think you'd agree to that, right?"

"I suppose."

"And you'll have led this long life where you said, 'Yeah, sure,' to every whim and desire that came into your head. Which is how a sociopath exists. But I bet that doesn't bother you, does it? Hearing yourself referred to as a sociopath. And you've probably never noticed the worst consequences of your actions. The misery, the waste. The plain ugliness that you leave in your wake."

The young man closes his mouth and stares. After a moment, he asks,
"Aren't you getting sleepy?"

"Should I be?"

He glances at her half-finished beer.

"Half a century," she says. "If you think about it, you can appreciate that there's going to be a wealth of new pills available. More powerful than any barbiturate, and infinitely more imaginative in their effects."

He squirms in his chair.

"Believe me, there are some amazing pharmaceutical products in that world. Pills that will make a person believe anything. Feel anything. Do anything, practically." She sits back, smiling with keen pleasure. "If a person were sufficiently clever, she could feed an old man a series of potent medications, and he would suddenly believe that he was young again, sitting inside an apartment that he hasn't visited for years. A young stallion enjoying an evening with two trusting, unfortunate women."

A tight, fearful voice asks, "Who are you?"

"The roommate," she replies. "I had been drinking that night, and when you came out of her room, we played our little game of 'Show Me.' Then you slipped a Mickey in my beer, and I fell asleep in this chair, and I woke up the next day, in my bed, with a miserable headache."

The man kicks with his legs, flails with his arms. But he doesn't possess the simple coordination to lift up off the chair.

"My friend, the first girl you drugged...she eventually killed herself, you know. Three years later, with an entire bottle of pills." In an instant,

the woman has become a seventy-year-old, a little heavy and shamelessly gray, staring down the hallway as if waiting for a door to open. "Maybe you weren't directly responsible for her death. I'll give you that much. Maybe she would have killed herself anyway. But I'll tell you this: I find it hard to believe that you made the life she had left any better."

He isn't young anymore. Speckled hands hang in front of his eyes, then he covers a still-handsome face. "So you slipped me something," he mutters. "So what're you going to do? Have your fun with me, is that it?"

"But I already have," she says.

Then she stands and with a calm slow voice explains, "Your body will carry you to one of two places now. You can return to her bedroom, if you want. You'll find her dead body waiting there. She'll look exactly as she did when I found her. And if you go there, you'll never wake up. You'll live out your days in a deep coma, and the only thing inside your head will be that room and a cold pale corpse.

"Or you can step into my room, which would be much, much worse."

He drops his hands. "How?"

"All of your victims...the ones I could find who are still alive...they're waiting behind my door. Silver-haired ladies, and young girls. Faces you'll know very well, and faces you probably won't even remember."

He glares at her.

"It's your choice," she tells him, walking slowly toward the hallway.

"What'll they do to me?" he squeaks.

She pauses. For a long moment, she stands on her tiptoes, letting a wide rich smile spread across her face. Then she pulls her red belt snug, and with genuine delight, she says, "What will they do? I don't think they know. Really, this will be the first time they've ever played the game."



For the past few years, Mr. Utley has been focusing his efforts on a series of stories about the folks who travel back to the Silurian Era to study the days when trilobites ruled the Earth. The muddy plains of the distant past prove to be a great backdrop for stories that are both timely and timeless. In this new one, modern ideologies clash by night on a darkling evaporite basin. (Note to editor: if you ever get your hands on a time machine, item #1 on your agenda should be going back to apologize to Matthew Arnold for writing that line.)

*In the here and now, Mr. Utley reports that his most recent book is a collection entitled *The Beasts of Love* and another collection, *Where or When*, is due out soon.*

Diluvium

By Steven Utley

THE PALEOZOIC SUN ROSE with its usual suddenness, and Jack started awake when light touched his face. Sarah had left the flap turned

back when she went out. Through the open end, he looked down a long, stony slope, onto a broad streambed. The rocks glistened from the previous evening's rain. The difference of a few meters of altitude and the absence of any plant life taller than a few centimeters allowed him, by the mere lifting of his head, to see far downstream, where the ancient eroded terrain, surrendering all pretense, became a hazy peneplain. The river threaded its languid way across the flatland to the limit of his vision. He watched the sky lighten to gray-blue. He could hear Sarah moving around outside.

Jack got up and washed his face with tepid water from the basin on the camp table. The aroma of coffee hung in the still air. He said, "Good morning," and kissed Sarah on the cheek.

"Enjoy the sunshine while it lasts," she said as she poured coffee into a tin mug and handed it over. "The weather station says we're in for more rain. More and then some. A line of thunderstorms coming in."

"Wouldn't know it to look at the sky."

"Check out that dark line along the horizon."

"Well, dang."

"Our mysterious visitor's still over there." Sarah nodded toward the opposite wall of the valley. The previous evening, they had been preparing to turn in when they saw the flicker of a flashlight in the distance.

"Where're the binoculars?"

"There behind you."

Jack peered through the binoculars but could see nothing.

"It's just one person," Sarah said, "I'm pretty sure. He's right by the streambed." She pointed. "See it?"

"Your eyesight's better than mine. Now who else could be here?"

"I thought at first it might be one of Van Thorp's people. They're supposed to be somewhere just north of here."

"They would've called or come on over."

Sarah nodded. "I gave him a buzz already, and he says all of his people are present and accounted for."

"Whoever it is should've come over and said hello."

"Would you try to cross that streambed at night?"

"Good point. I'll ask the frau überdirektor at base camp."

"Satellite should be overhead."

Jack picked up the phone, punched buttons, and said, "Ruth," and after a moment the voice at the other end said, "Why, Jack! What can I do for you?"

"We seem to have a stray person in our valley. Van Thorp says it's not one of his people. Any idea who it could be?"

"Let me check. Call you back in a second."

The second dragged into minutes. Finally, Jack shrugged and put the phone down and got to work; for several days he and Sarah had been collecting fossils along the ridge, a beautiful Cambrian outcrop. The morning passed. It was noon before Ruth called back.

"If it isn't some maverick of Van Thorp's," she told Jack, "I don't know who it can possibly be. There's not supposed to be anybody else in your area."

"Well, whoever it is," Jack said, glancing at the gathering overcast, "is going to get washed all the way downriver to you when this storm breaks.

He's dumped his kit right on the bank of the stream, well below the highwater mark."

"Can you signal him?"

"We haven't caught so much as a glimpse of him. Guess I'd better wander over and save the idiot's life. Besides, I always like to know who my neighbors are. Bye, Ruth."

"Keep me posted, Jack. Bye."

Sarah stood looking up at the gathering overcast. "Sky's definitely getting darker. You don't have very much time."

"Let's make sure we're still all lashed down. Then I'll go check out our neighbor."

"You'd better step on it, then. In fact, why don't you go on over now? I can take care of everything here. That storm's coming fast."

"All right."

"Maybe you should take the first-aid kit." He looked at her; she shrugged. "Just in case."

Jack put the first-aid kit into his knapsack and, without preamble, set off down the slope. As he approached it, the streambed began to take on the appearance of a stretch of very bad two-lane blacktop. Water-borne sand and pebbles had eroded away softer rock, creating a network of narrow, sinuous channels, some as much as a meter wide and a meter deep. Dark turbid water gurgled in the hollows; Jack could see it as well as hear it as he stepped carefully from one stony rim to the next. The footing, treacherous enough by day, would have been impossible during the night.

He gained the opposite slope and called out loudly. A rolled-up sleeping bag and a knapsack lay at the base of a pile of broken rock. He heard a weak cry, "Over here," and walked around the rocks and saw a long, lean man sitting on the ground, his back supported against a boulder. The man wore a khaki safari suit, now much the worse for wear. He had removed one boot; Jack could see for himself that the ankle was swollen. The man gave him a tired grin and said, "My prayers are answered."

"Is your ankle broken?" Jack said, dropping his pack.

The man shook his head. "Twisted it in the dark."

"Have you been lying here all this time?" Jack asked as he knelt and examined the ankle. "We saw your light last night. We're camped up on the opposite ridge."

"I didn't know anybody was around."

"Still." Jack dug the first-aid kit out of his knapsack. "You could've used your phone. Anyone in range would've answered your distress signal."

"Phone's on the blink. I don't know what the problem is. By the way, my name's Farlough. Jim Farlough."

Jack introduced himself, adding, "I'm with the P.R.I. team."

"Eh?" Farlough winced as Jack began to wrap his ankle.

"The Paleontological Research Institute. Cornell." Jack suddenly sat back on his heels. "Farlough? James Farlough? *The Doctor Farlough? Advocates for Biblical Creation?*"

Farlough grinned. "My reputation precedes me."

Before Jack could reply, his earphone filled with static, then Sarah said, "Just checking with you. Find our stranger?"

He touched his ear to show the other man that he had a call. "Yes. It's Doctor Farlough himself. From the A.B.C.s."

"What?"

"Doctor James Farlough. As in the A.B.C.s. You know."

Sarah did not respond immediately. Then: "Jack, you're kidding me."

"'Fraid not."

"*The Farlough? The A.B.C.s?*"

"'Fraid so."

"What's he doing here?"

"For starters, he's sprained his ankle."

"But how'd he get here? And —"

"Ask Ruth. I'll call you back, Sarah." Jack lowered his hand. To Farlough he said, "Did you come upriver on the supply barge?"

"No, over the ridge."

"Just you, by yourself?"

"Of course not. My group's camped two, three days' journey from here. Off thataway," and Farlough jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

"The only thing off 'thataway' is an evaporite basin the size of California. If your people aren't equipped any better than you, they're all going to die out there."

"Give us some credit, please. I thought this region looked promising."

The dark clouds had moved in quickly while they talked, and a few

enormous raindrops began to spatter the dust around them. One struck Jack on the cheek with stinging force.

"Jack," Sarah said in his ear, "talk to me."

"I'm here."

"I couldn't raise Ruth."

"Take care of yourself, I'll be okay. I've got to stick with Doctor Farlough for the time being." He broke the connection and told Farlough, "I'm not going to try to lug you across the streambed. We'd fall in a pothole for sure. We've got to get to higher ground on this side, and right away. I've seen this stream in flood." He stepped back and surveyed the prospects, then pointed to a jumble of large boulders. "We should be able to stay out of the worst of it up there."

Jack gathered Farlough's meager equipment, stooped and got the man's arm over his shoulder, and drew him up.

"This is going to be like running a three-legged sack race," he said, "with an anvil tied around my neck."

They crept slowly and painfully up the slope, with frequent pauses for rest. Raindrops smacked them with increasing force, until the bottom seemed simply to drop out of the sky. They were soaked and half-blinded when, at last, they found a sheltered space among the boulders that barely accommodated them. The howling wind defeated speech. Jack dropped the gear and lowered Farlough as gently as possible. Then he removed a heatpot from Farlough's equipment and got it going and stuffed the rest of the equipment into a dry crevice. The heatpot put out just enough light to cast their shadows on the enclosing rocks and just enough warmth to make them uncomfortable in their sodden clothing as they watched the storm. There was nothing else to do. Lightning flashes illuminated a black, endlessly writhing torrent at the bottom of the slope. Jack did not worry about Sarah but wished that he were snuggling with her in their sleeping bag. He was not sure afterward, but he thought he dozed.

After what seemed like a long time, the wind abruptly fell off and the rain began to come down at a steeper angle. Jack could just hear himself when he asked Farlough, "Are you hungry? I always travel with a pocketful of crackers and a chocolate bar."

Farlough absently shook his head. He seemed entranced by the storm.

After a couple of minutes, he said, "This doesn't look like it's going to let up anytime soon."

"Are you comfortable there?"

"Yes. Thank you. Thank you for coming to my rescue. There are coffeepaks in my knapsack there. Be just the thing."

Jack rummaged in the knapsack and pulled out a coffeepak. As he poured water from his canteen into the pack and set it on the heatpot, Farlough said, "You know, it's exciting to think that we are, this moment, within a few years of the end of the Noachian flood described in Genesis. In the aftermath of the deluge, of course, there must have been localized — "

Jack sat back and said, "Just why are you here in the Paleozoic?"

Farlough looked around at him now, and his mouth twisted drolly. "For the same reason everyone else is. To find out things for myself."

"Looking for Adam and Eve?"

"Not at all. Adam and Eve have already been dead for quite some time. We are, as I said, actually in the immediate aftermath of the great global inundation described in the Book of Genesis. Between the expulsion from the Garden of Eden and the confusion of tongues."

"Do you really believe that?"

"No less completely and absolutely than you believe life just started from chemicals combining at random."

"Chemicals don't combine at random. They combine in very particular and predictable ways. Two atoms of hydrogen plus one atom of oxygen always equal water." Jack indicated the simmering coffeepak between them with a flick of an index finger. "Heat water in a coffeepak and you always get — coffee. And so on."

Farlough gestured negligently, as though the point was beside the point. "We are here — my colleagues and I — to prove the truth of diluvial geology, which states that the fossil record and almost all modern landforms were created by the waters of the Noachian deluge."

"You thinking of interviewing Noah himself?"

"Noah's story has already been written. Unfortunately, it doesn't include visitors from the future."

Jack laughed shortly. "Do you suppose he's still floating around in the Ark, or is he already stuck on that mountaintop?"

In reply, the other man only smiled. Jack decanted half of the coffeepak's contents into a metal cup and handed that over to Farlough, who accepted it with a nod of thanks. They sat and sipped for the better part of a minute.

Then Farlough said, "Our *hope* is that the repopulation of the world has already begun. It would be fascinating to observe the rise of the civilization that built the Tower of Babel. But all we need to prove our case is to find just one kind of creature that the conservative scientific establishment says shouldn't be here in the so-called Paleozoic age."

"You mean besides us anomalous humans."

"Anything that doesn't belong." Farlough drained his cup and set it beside his thigh; he braced his arms and shifted his fundament slightly, grimacing as he did so, then, apparently more comfortable than he had been, settled back against the rock, crossed his hands over his belly, and regarded Jack with an expression of tolerant amusement.

"You call this age the Paleozoic," he said, "your physicists prattle about spacetime anomalies and uncertainty principles and the infinite replication of worlds. *We* believe that God created the so-called anomaly so that we could at long last — but once and for all — prove the fallacy of the uniformitarian and evolutionist doctrines so dear to the scientific establishment. That establishment did everything it could to keep us from coming here. It took the combined efforts of right-minded public officials and private citizens to finally get us here. Private citizens raised the money, too."

"Well, if we establishment types start turning up anomalous artifacts, we'll know who to blame. I've never known a creationist who was above faking evidence."

"What sort of fake evidence do you have in mind, and — " Farlough held his elongate arms out to the sides, his fingertips brushing the walls of their shelter " — where do you suppose I have secreted it on my person?" He lowered his arms and crossed his hands over his belly again. "Not that there haven't been some fraudulent claims made in the name of diluvial geology, of course. Those so-called man tracks in that dinosaur trackway in Texas haunt us just as you establishment scientists are haunted by — " he gave Jack a cheerfully malicious smile " — Piltdown man."

"That crack hasn't drawn blood in a long time," Jack said mildly.

"Like all scientific frauds, Piltdown was eventually found out — by scientists."

"Nevertheless, the incidence of fraud among creationists is nothing like as great as among establishment scientists. Your whole system is a fraud, because of what you omit from it. Even when evidence of intelligent design literally crawls in front of you. I refer of course to one of the most enduring arguments against the theory of evolution — the bombardier beetle!"

Jack laughed out loud. "Ah, yes! Our old friend, the bombardier beetle! You know, when I was a kid, I saw the animated feature version of that allegedly beloved children's classic, *Bomby the Bombardier Beetle*."

"Clearly you didn't profit from the viewing."

"On the contrary. I learned an awful lot from it. I learned the beetle's ability to fart fire is certain proof of a creator. I learned bombardier beetles are cute, talk in squeaky voices, and somehow are cognizant of the Bible and its import — though it wasn't clear why they should be, since they don't have souls."

Farlough smirked. "You think I'm a narrow-minded, ill-read boob or even an illiterate, don't you? I am in fact an omnivorous, voracious reader. I read *Bomby* at the appropriate age. I have since read Tolstoy, Kafka, and much else — even Darwin. Know thy enemy. I see by your expression you don't believe me. Very well, let's take Hazel May Rue's book, since you brought it up. The scientific establishment has always dismissed *Bomby* as mere anti-Darwin propaganda."

"You can hardly blame us. It was published by the old Institute for Creation Research."

"Yet it addresses precisely the same issues," Farlough said, "that concern Kafka — arguably the most twentieth-century of writers — in his famous 'Metamorphosis.' Gregor Samsa awakes one morning to find himself transformed — evolved or more accurately devolved, though Kafka doesn't use either term — into a gigantic insect. Gregor finds his new body ill-suited to the demands of survival, perishes miserably, and is swept out in the garbage. *Bomby* embodies the creationist idea that everything *is* as it was created, thus, there can be no change — no evolution. But *Bomby* also presents the idea that the agent of this creation, unlike the unidentified agent of change in Kafka's tale, is beneficent and

knows best for all its — *His*, God's — creatures. Gregor Samsa necessarily fails to survive because his change is unnatural, literally ungodly, whereas Bomby, as his elders explain to him, will survive because God has given him survival traits."

Jack, who had listened open-mouthed throughout this monologue, shook his head and said in a dumbfounded and yet grudgingly admiring tone of voice, "Now I've heard goddamn everything." He leaned against the most comfortable portion of rock behind him. "Not that I'm conceding a thing, but I'm not going to argue flood geology with you anymore. I'm going to take a nap."

"I'm just trying to pass the time."

"Try passing it in silent communion with the elements. I'd argue with you some more if we were back home and you were trying to convince the school board to put *Bomby* on the required reading list. But we're here in Paleozoic time, hundreds of millions of years from home — "

"A few thousands," Farlough said good-naturedly.

"Whatever. Anyway, the sound of rain activates the sleep center in my brain. Part of my inheritance from some tiny insectivore."

Jack closed his eyes. Eventually, he did fall asleep.

The rain had subsided to a drizzle when he snapped back into wakefulness. Across from him, Farlough slept with his chin on his breast. Jack tried to call Sarah and got only a painful earful of static. He put the phone away and fumed for a while and then slept again. He awoke the second time to find the clouds had parted to either side of a bright full moon that poured down milky light. The phone still was not working, and the stream was still a roiling, hissing barrier. Across from him, Farlough awoke with a shudder. He stretched and looked out the mouth of their shelter and said, "What a big beautiful moon."

"I wish it was a new moon and the stars were out," Jack growled. "Then you could point out the north star to me."

Farlough regarded him with suspicion. "I'm not an astronomer."

"Oh, come on. Everybody over the age of six knows where the north star's supposed to be." Farlough did not rise to the challenge. "Y'know, there's this old sci-fi story — there's a planet with more than one sun, where night falls only once every few thousand years. When it does and all

the stars come out, everybody goes crazy at the sight of them, and civilization collapses."

"Ah," Farlough nodded. "And you think the sight of the strange Paleozoic night sky should make me go crazy as well?"

"No, I think you're already crazy. But at least admit the sky here is strange. Notice how much bigger the moon looks? That's because it's closer to the Earth than it will be in Cenozoic time."

"No," Farlough said, "it looks bigger simply because it looks bigger. The deluge worked profound changes on the world. The atmosphere creates optical distortions, and —"

"I give up."

Jack tried several more times to call Sarah. Finally, he gave that up, too, and prepared a meal for Farlough and himself. They spoke little. The moon passed, and the sound of the racing stream lulled Jack back to sleep.

He was stiff and slightly chilled when he awoke for the third time. Sunlight slanted through gaps in his shelter. The heatpot was missing. So was Farlough.

Jack pushed himself up and stepped into the steaming morning. Almost at once the phone beeped.

"Jack," Sarah said. "Thank goodness. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. But *he's* missing, and so's all his stuff."

"I haven't seen him, and I've been watching your side ever since the sun came up."

"Then where'd he go?"

"Where *could* he go?"

"Nowhere far away. Not with that ankle of his. I'm stuck on this side until the water goes down, so I may as well look for him. Any word yet from Ruth?"

"No. Still can't get through. Maybe the storm fried something down there."

"Keep trying. If you do get through, ask about a guy named Farlough and a creationist expedition. I'm going to look for our stray."

By that afternoon, Jack was able to cross the stream, picking his way carefully from the rim of one channel to the next. He trudged up the slope to the camp. He was tired and muddy, but Sarah embraced him tightly. She

had coffee and hot food waiting, too. He dropped his knapsack, sat down wearily, and said, "No place like home."

"No sign of him?"

"None. Nothing. Not a trace."

"It gets weirder. I managed to raise the base a little while ago. Ruth says there's nobody here by the name of Farlough, and there's certainly no creationist expedition."

Jack looked at her solemnly. "This is starting to creep me out. You can't sneak so much as a paper clip through the anomaly. Never mind a creationist. Never mind a whole pack of creationists."

Sarah returned his look. "Are we imagining this?"

"No. Of course not." He dug the first-aid kit out of his knapsack and snapped it open. "I wrapped his ankle for him. The bandage is gone. He's gone. All his stuff is gone. *Where?*"

"What're you going to tell Ruth? You know she'll want to follow through on this."

"I haven't the faintest idea. I really don't."

Later, they gazed up at the night sky from their sleeping bag, and after some time had passed without words, Sarah, with her head against Jack's and her arm draped across his chest, said, "Maybe he was from some other place."

"What other place could he be from?"

"One of those alternate universes. Maybe the spacetime anomaly isn't just the interface between our own time and this prehistoric age. Maybe there really are infinite multiple universes like the physicists talk about. Each slightly different or a whole lot different from all the others. And maybe this man you met slipped through from one of them."

"Sar, we can't give Ruth a story like that. She'd have us sent home in straitjackets."

"What else can we give her? He was here, and now he's gone."

"Gone *where?*"

"So maybe," Sarah said after several seconds, "he slipped back into some other universe. His own universe. And it's everything the creationists say this one is. It's cozy and confined and only six thousand years old, and there's no evolution, and the Sun goes around the Earth. God — *a* god, *some* god — is in his heaven there. Laws of physics there are apt to be suspended without warning, according to this deity's whim."

"Maybe I should send you home in a straitjacket."

"I'm just supposing. In our own universe, all Farlough and other creationists can do is fume about the physical laws governing it. And be, I don't know, scared, I guess is the word. Scared of its vastness and implacability and its utter indifference. But the unpredictable physical laws in that other universe let this other Farlough come through our universe for a little while."

Jack shivered in spite of himself. He said, "Frankly, it sounds like a really terrifying place to live."

They lay at the base of the beautiful Cambrian outcrop and looked up at the moon and the stars, and the moon and the stars looked down at them, and at last one of them murmured to the other, "Well, I'm glad we're right where we are." ㊦

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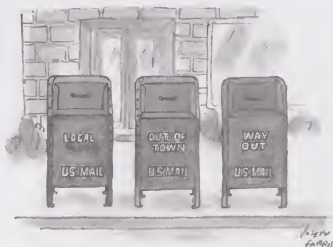
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Terry Bisson's first fable about young Billy appeared in our Oct/Nov 2005 issue. In that one, he battled ants. Now he encounters a fairy. What will it be next! Spacemen! Unicorns! The President! Stay tuned!

Billy and the Fairy

By Terry Bisson

“**T**HERE'S SOMETHING IN MY room,” said Billy. “I think it's a fairy.”
“Fairies are make-believe,” said Billy's mother.

“It glows in the dark,” said Billy.

“Go back to bed,” said Billy's father.

Billy's bed was shaped like a race car. There was a little tiny person sitting on the front of the bed, beside the steering wheel.

“Are you a fairy?” Billy asked.

“Who wants to know?”

“Me. It's my room.”

“So what,” said the fairy.

Billy thought about that. “Are you really a fairy?” he asked.

“Are you really a little boy?”

“That's a stupid question.”

“You're a stupid little boy.”

"What are you doing in my room? My mother says fairies are make-believe."

"They are," said the fairy. "Real fairies are. I'm not."

"I thought you said you were a real fairy."

"I never said that. I'm really a fairy, but I'm not a real fairy. Real fairies are make-believe. I'm not make-believe."

"Make-believe stuff is stupid," said Billy, getting into bed. "Why aren't you wearing any pants?"

"Fairies don't have to. Who is that on your pajamas?"

"Dale Earnhardt. He's a race car driver."

"He looks like your father," said the fairy. "Aren't you supposed to sleep with your head at this end?"

"I'm afraid of you," said Billy.

"Suit yourself," said the fairy.

In the morning, the fairy was gone.

"Is there such a thing," Billy asked at breakfast, "as fairies?"

"Are there such a thing," his mother said.

That didn't sound right to Billy. "There's just one," he said. "He doesn't wear any pants."

"Then watch out for him," said Billy's father.

"It's okay to believe in make-believe," said Billy's mother. "Just don't confuse it with reality."

"Huh?" said Billy.

"And don't forget those leaves," said Billy's father, getting up to go.

Billy picked up the leaves out of the driveway. It was his only chore. When he was finished, he went to his room.

He was hoping to talk to the fairy but the fairy was gone. There was a wet spot by the steering wheel, where it had sat.

When Billy went to bed, the fairy was back. It glowed in the dark, like a lightning bug.

"Where do fairies go during the day?" Billy asked.

"Real fairies? They don't go anywhere. They're only make-believe. They have no place to go. No place would have them."

"Where do you go?"

"Wouldn't you like to know," said the fairy.

"Why do you come here?" asked Billy.

"I like this bed. It's shaped like a race car."

"You can sit on it," Billy said. "But I wish you would wear pants."

The next morning, the fairy was gone. There was a wet spot on Billy's bed.

"What if there was just one fairy?" Billy asked at breakfast. "Would that be make-believe?"

"Of course," said Billy's mother. "Every child has a right to a little make-believe."

"There you go with those rights again," said Billy's father. He patted Billy on the head, like a dog. "I guess one fairy's okay, as long as he helps you pick up those leaves out of the driveway."

"He doesn't do things," said Billy.

First Billy picked up the leaves, then he went to his room. The fairy was sitting on his bed, next to the steering wheel.

"What do fairies do?" asked Billy.

"Nothing much," said the fairy. "Sometimes we kill people."

"Huh?"

"When God wants a new angel in Heaven, sometimes He sends a fairy down to kill him. Or her."

"Are you here to kill me?"

"Of course not," said the fairy.

Billy thought about that. "My mom doesn't believe in fairies," he said.

"So what."

"So she says you are just make-believe. That's what."

"That's because she's stupid."

"My mom's not stupid."

"That's what you think," said the fairy.

Billy had an idea. "Wait here," he said.

Billy went into the kitchen.

"Come quick," he said. "I want to show you something."

"Not the fairy, Billy," his mother said. She was baking a pie. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

"Please, Mom," said Billy.

Billy's mother wiped her hands and followed him into his bedroom. The fairy was gone. But that was okay.

"Look, Mom!" said Billy. He showed her the wet spot on the bed. "That's where it was sitting."

"Billy," said Billy's mother.

"Billy's growing up," said Billy's mother at dinner.

"Good. Then maybe he can do what he's told," said Billy's father. "Like pick up the leaves out of the driveway."

"But I did," said Billy.

"Sir."

"Sir."

"Then where did I find this little item?" Billy's father pulled a leaf from his shirt pocket and set it on the table.

"They fall off the trees," said Billy.

Billy put on his pajamas. The fairy was sitting on the bed.

"I saw your guy today," the fairy said. "Dale Earnhardt."

Dale Earnhardt was dead. Billy had seen the crash on TV.

"No you didn't," Billy said. "And I wish you would wear pants."

"Fairies don't have to wear pants. Dale said to tell you hello."

"No, he didn't."

"You're right, he didn't," said the fairy. "Dead people don't say hello. I did see him, though."

"Where? In Heaven?"

The fairy laughed. It made a nasty little tinkling sound.

"I didn't know him anyway," said Billy, getting into bed. "He was just famous."

Billy woke up in the middle of the night.

The fairy was still there, glowing like a lightning bug.

"Do you really kill people?" Billy asked.

"Sometimes."

"Why doesn't God send an angel down to do it?"

"Angels are make-believe. I use a long needle."

Billy thought about that. "Can I see it?"

"Go back to sleep, Billy."

Billy went back to sleep.

"How's your fairy doing?" Billy's mother asked at breakfast. "Is it still there?"

"Sometimes," Billy said.

"Maybe he can help you pick up the leaves out of the driveway before I get home," said Billy's father.

"He doesn't do things," said Billy. "I told you."

"Sir."

"Sir."

Billy picked up the leaves himself. There was nothing else to do anyway. The fairy was gone all day.

"I thought you and your fairy were going to pick up the leaves out of the driveway before I got home," said Billy's father at dinner.

"But I did," said Billy. "Sir."

"Then where did I find this little item?"

"Do you really kill people?" asked Billy. He was getting ready for bed.

"You already asked me that," said the fairy. "Who do you want me to kill?"

Billy thought about that. "My father," he said.

The next morning, Billy's father slumped over at the breakfast table.

"Oh dear," said Billy's mother.

He was dead. The ambulance came and got him.

"That was cool," said Billy that night as he was putting on his pajamas. "But I didn't see any long needle."

"Of course not," said the fairy.

The next day, the fairy killed Billy's mother.

She slumped over and her face went into the pie. This time, Billy saw the long needle.

The fairy was sitting on top of the refrigerator. Its little legs were crossed.

"That was stupid," said Billy. "Now I don't have any parents."

"So what."

"So the police will come and put me in the orphanage, that's what."

"Not if they don't know she's dead," said the fairy.

Billy thought about that. He dragged his mother into the closet and shut the door.

"I still don't have anybody to take care of me," he said.

"Clean up the pie," said the fairy. "I'll ask around."

That night there was no supper. Billy got a box of cereal and took it to his room.

Dale Earnhardt was sitting on the bed. "Out of the box," he said. "Classy."

"I thought you were dead," said Billy. "I saw the crash on TV."

"Sit down, kid," said Dale Earnhardt. He stretched out on the bed. Billy sat down beside him.

"I can deal with the stiff in the closet," Dale Earnhardt said. "But you have to do your part, kid."

"What's that?"

"Sir."

"Sir."

"There's the little matter of the leaves in the driveway."

Billy thought about that. He looked around for the fairy, but the fairy was gone.

There was only a wet spot where it once had been.



"Twas not long ago—perhaps two years—when our sometime contributor Ms. Karen Joy Fowler attained bestsellerdom with her examination of modern-day life's foibles through the lens she called The Jane Austen Book Club. Now our more frequent contributor, Mr. Albert Cowdrey of New Orleans, undertakes to show us a glimpse of the future as one might perceive it if viewed through a lens ground by Ms. Austen herself.

Imitation of Life

By Albert E. Cowdrey

M

ILLY MURPHY WELCOMED Emma Smythe-Denby to the Igloo, not quite with open arms — Emma didn't favor huggy-kissy — but with a perfectly genuine smile.

"So you survived Town!" she cried, and Emma replied, "Barely!"

Reflecting a bygone fashion for Eskimo architecture, Milly's parlor was dome-shaped and painted white. A banquette cushioned in scarlet faux silk ran around the room, except where the outside door and a smaller door leading to her private quarters interrupted it. Hidden from view behind the banquette were narrow spaces where Milly stored old clothes, retired furniture, and — on occasion — one of her lovers, when another put in an unexpected appearance.

Today a silver kettle and a seedcake waited on the circular table in the center of the room, and the two ladies settled down for tea and a good chat.

"Well, did you look at any love bots?" Milly demanded. (She had never been good at letting others speak first.)

Emma frowned, deliberately inserted a nice slab of cake into her

mouth, and chewed slowly, letting her overcurious friend wait. Though tempted to reprove her for prying, she really needed to talk to someone with experience, and Milly had that — in spades.

"It was most embarrassing," she said at last, after washing the cake down with a long sip of Earl Grey. "Men and women standing around, ignoring one other and staring at those — those things."

"Now, Emma. Some of them look perfectly delicious. Whatever that stuff is they use for skin looks so much more real than, you know, skin."

"In spite of their attractiveness, I notice that you, Milly, stick to human beings."

"Well, yes. So much warmer and more complex, and...and *dangerous*, you know."

Emma was far too shrewd not to see that Milly had recommended a bot because she despaired of her friend ever winning a human lover. Feeling regretfully inclined to agree with her, Emma sighed.

"There are times when I feel quite lonely," she admitted. "And of course a bot is so convenient — when you don't want it, you just put it in a corner and turn it off. So difficult to do with a man. But no: Such a relationship too much resembles a ghastly adult version of playing with dolls."

Milly hitched her ample backside forward and cut them both more cake. She could see that her old-maid friend needed encouragement.

"You know, Emma, you needn't get one as anything but a companion. Later on, if you decide you want more, you can have him retrofitted."

"Milly, let us discuss some other topic. After a day among the tiring throngs of Town, and the embarrassment of that awful store — the Hot Bot Spot, have you ever heard such a name? — I'm in no mood for anything but old-fashioned village gossip.... Has new information surfaced on Miss Choy's affair with the butcher in 3030 Zeta?"

As a matter of fact, Milly's Instantmail had been updated on that very subject less than twenty minutes ago. Reluctant as she was to put aside, even for a moment, the enthralling task of helping her friend find love, she was consoled by being able to impart new and fascinating information about romance in distant Sinkiang.

Anyway, it wasn't so far off the main topic, was it? Love conquers all, including Chinese butchers. She proceeded to tell Emma just exactly what

had happened, and when and how — after all, she'd watched it in MD (for multidimensional) Telly, and knew every detail.

Her friend listened in shocked fascination. At least, she reflected, there was this to be said for a bot: unless you commanded it to, it didn't go on anybody's Instantmail. How much more...decent that seemed, rather than joining the planetary gossip mill that made all the world's villages one.

Tall, angular and erect, Emma strode rather than walked down the main street of 1220 Alpha, feeling the familiar sights and sounds enfold her like a well-worn, comforting garment.

Everything needful to human life lay close at hand. Lined up along faux-stone streets and well-raked earthen lanes stood some two hundred neat houses, the Micromarket, and those eternal elements of British life — a tea room (the Lemon Tree) and two pubs (the Gnashing Tusk and the King's Evil).

The Village Playhouse staged pantomimes using local children and light operas enacted by touring companies. Medical and dental needs were met by a Nursing Bot who kept in twenty-four-hour-a-day contact with a Physician Superbot stored in a cavern in the Alps. The Constable's Office, the Town Hall, and the Anglican Meditation Pavilion represented the authority of Church and State.

Trouble and disorder were far away. The nearest school stood half an hour distant in 1315 Alpha, while Town — the large market center of Mulling Crucis, with its throng of 6,000 restlessly jostling people — lay some two hours distant by omnibus. *Thank Heaven*, thought Emma, *that I am no longer there!*

She had just finished giving thanks when she spotted a small card nailed to a linden tree. Something was written on it in almost invisible letters. Frowning, she approached and read:

*big is for pigs
small is all*

"The Progress Gang!" she exclaimed aloud.

For a long moment, Hot Bots were replaced in her thoughts by a hot issue — indeed, the hottest issue then dividing the village.

Even though dear old 1220 was so small that every cross-street ended in woods or meadows, and so quiet that even the roosters slept late, a group of activists were demanding that the town be made smaller and stiller yet.

Led by an irritating schoolmaster named Martin Ffrench-Dobbyn, this cabal of malcontents proposed to drive out the market, the pubs, and the tea room. As Ffrench-Dobbyn pointed out by Instantmail, residents could order everything needful from a Regional Supply Depot, and the nuisance of stocking goods and drawing vermin would be done away with entirely. The drunken noise of the pubs would fade to agreeable silence; the flyblown sweets of the tea room would cease to spread intestinal disease. He even rejected the Village Playhouse as unnecessary, since professional productions could be seen every night, not only on large parlor Tellys, but on hand-held Tellyphones.

That, he said, was how progressive villages acted, citing 1919 Beta in the Pas de Calais, which had been rendered so peaceful that any noise greater than the brushing of one's teeth brought a citation from the gendarmes.

The issue mattered most to the tradesmen — to the market owner, his tenants the grocer, the butcher, and the fishmonger, the tailor, Miss White who ran the Lemon Tree, the publicans, and the waiters, bag-boys, checkers, barmaids, etc., who worked for them. But many leisured people (including Emma, who'd been left a nice competence by her father, Colonel Smythe-Denby) supported the tradesmen. She suspected that Ffrench-Dobbyn was reacting to the screaming horror of life as a schoolmaster by trying to silence every sound in the village where he lived. But that was no reason to impose his own needs on others. She loved village life, but not when it was entirely deprived of the life part.

The market and the tea room provided most of her opportunities to meet her fellow citizens in the flesh; as for the Playhouse, she was not only a playgoer but a volunteer backstage, finding in the creation of costumes, masks, and scenery a welcome outlet for her artistic instincts. She needed public meeting-places quite as much as their owners and workers needed her patronage, and the theater needed her talents.

As these thoughts raced through her mind, Emma's brows contracted, disturbing the placidity of her high smooth forehead. Yet she resisted her first impulse, which was to tear the sign down. Better to leave vandalism

to the Americans, for whom it was natural. Instead, sniffing with magnificent disdain, she strode on, heading for home.

HER COTTAGE was a two-story cylinder with a conical roof covered in faux thatch, reflecting a fashion for African architecture that had flourished a generation ago. She let herself in with profound gratitude that her day was over at last. The housebot had finished its work, and the tiles and woodwork glistened.

Emma changed into a lounging robe, settled down with a glass of dandelion wine in front of her Telly, and murmured softly, "Update." She got a replay of the Choy-butcher saga, which she hastily tuned out; a Virtual Football Championship game between 961 Xi and somebody, which she dismissed as well. Surfing on, she encountered a tumultuous scene in the Town Hall. The Progress Gang under their leader Ffrench-Dobbyn were staging a silent demonstration against the stores, linking arms and blocking access to the podium, while defenders of the status quo shouted and stamped in rage.

Disgusted, she turned off the wretched tube and set about fixing dinner. Unlike many residents of Alpha, she did her own cooking, because bots could not seem to learn how to adjust the flavours properly for her palate. (Emma always spelled the word *flavour* the ancient British way, because it seemed more, well, flavourful.)

The time was quite late, past Twenty-two, when at last she settled down with a glass of hot milk spiked with two teaspoons of brandy, and began getting in the mood to sleep. Ignoring the Late News, she tuned in the Oxbridge Channel because — years ago, as a student — she'd learned that nothing produced peaceful slumber more quickly than being lectured to.

Tonight a don wearing a scholar's gown and spadelike black beard was holding forth on Recent History, which turned out to mean the last three centuries. Well, she reflected, at any rate that was better than a palaeontologist she'd once heard, whose idea of Recent Time was the last sixty-five million years." The planet Earth has not always been the peaceful, rational place we know today," the beard began. "Once it was oppressed by gigantic cities and bustling throngs."

A file clip followed, showing a demonic landscape of antlike humans swarming among piles of appalling architecture. The air reeked visibly with coffee-colored fumes; vehicles crept by like a horde of metallic beetles at work on a dunghill; the noise was deafening; the towers seemed about to topple on the people's heads. The scene was so disturbing that Emma would have switched it off, if the lecturer himself hadn't done so.

"Fortunately," the beard went on, "war, terrorism, and the progress of science worked together to transform this hellish landscape. As weapons steadily shrank in size and cost, and their destructive power just as steadily increased, cities became too dangerous to inhabit. At the same time, improving methods of communication rendered them unnecessary.

"Throughout history, people have abandoned great cities — Uxmal and Nineveh, Mohenjo-Daro and Petra, Knossos and Babylon and Angkor Wat — leaving them to the jungles and deserts, to the animals and birds. The people of three hundred years ago did the same, only they remained united by electronic bonds in the dispersed cells we call villages. More than five million of these charming settlements now exist worldwide, the smallest identified only by numbers and by Greek letters representing the twenty-four time zones...."

Emma had heard enough. Flicking off the tube, she finished her toddy and fumbled her way upstairs to bed. Hot milk, brandy, and scholarship proceeded to perform their customary magic, and she hardly fluttered an eyelid until dawn.

Morning brought a fresh, well-boiled egg and a cup of strong tea. After enjoying both, Emma — more from a feeling of duty than from any desire to be informed — turned on the Oh-Seven News. Thus she learned belatedly that shocking events had taken place last night at Town Hall.

Experience had shown that few things were more annoying to opponents than silent demonstrations — which was why the Progress Gang staged them. The sight of people refusing to engage in reasoned debate on a public issue of major importance, yet preventing others from doing so, so enraged the local tradesmen that they fell upon Gang members with fists and folding chairs, sending a quartet of battered wretches to the Nursing Bot for treatment. The other Progress Gangsters had fled into the night.

Interviewed, the Constable — whose brother owned the Micromarket

— said that he hadn't made any arrests because "in a free society, obedience to the law must be optional." He did, however, say that he planned to restore order by a show of force, and he'd sent a request to Town for a heavy-
weapons team (who carried billy clubs) to aid him in quieting the agitated public. Emma didn't agree with the Constable's view of law *at all*. Nor did she find it amusing (as he seemed to) that Miss White from the Lemon Tree and a mob of butchers, bakers, waiters, waitresses, barmaids, checkout girls from the Micromarket, two stout publicans, the tailor's assistant, and their sympathizers from all walks of life had spent the night hunting Gang members through the woods with cricket bats and packs of beagles.

At this moment her Tellyphone chimed. Her caller was Milly, and her usually cheerful red face betrayed her state of shock.

"My dear," she cried, "have you heard about the riot? Why, you'd think we lived in the twenty-first century!"

"Quite, quite appalling," Emma agreed. "Repulsive as Gang members are, they are harmless if ignored — as they ought to be, by all decent people."

At this Milly appeared to grow suddenly hesitant and unsure of herself.

"Emma," she faltered, "I really called to...that is, I wonder if...if I might ask a great favor of you."

"Certainly you may."

"The fact is," Milly whispered, "that at this moment I am sheltering a member of the Progress Gang from the violence of the mob!"

"Oh, Milly! How brave of you!"

"I've got him crammed into a rather small space behind my banquette; I felt morally obliged to save his life, but not to make him comfortable. He's that priggish schoolmaster Ffrench-Dobbyn, who started all the trouble in the first place."

"Milly, this is none of my business, but...is he one of your — your —"

"My lovers? Good heavens, no. He's absolutely a frozen fish. If he's got a sweetheart, it's probably at the end of his right arm. On the other hand — so to speak — he may be a leftie!"

Though Emma was shocked by her friend's Rabelaisian wit, she couldn't repress a shriek of laughter when Milly scored this hit on the obnoxious Ffrench-Dobbyn.

"However, I can't let him stay there. I may need the space at any

moment, and I've found by hard experience that when two gentlemen are stored under the banquette at the same time, they rarely get along. Could you — would you — ”

“Of course,” replied Emma at once. She would rather have done anything else than what Milly wanted, but duty was duty.

“This person may take refuge with me,” she ruled, “until public order is restored, which I can only hope will be done quickly.”

“Emma, you *are* an angel. I shall pack him into the boot of my Minibile, and bring him over at once.”

Sighing, Emma clicked off. She'd been looking forward to a quiet, peaceful day: digging up a little bindweed in the garden; docking a plantain leaf or two; painting some puppets she'd promised the Playhouse for a children's Punch and Judy show; later, perhaps, trying out a new recipe for Lukewarm Rabbit Curry with Turnips and Parsnips she'd recently heard praised on a Telly program called *Ye Olde Englishe Cooke-Booke*. Now, instead of these peaceable pursuits, she found herself condemned to play hostess, not merely to a member of the Progress Gang, but to its leader! Well, if she must, she must. She dressed for the day in severe tweeds and avoided the least touch of makeup, in order to exclude every bit of sympathy from her appearance, as well as from her heart.

But when Milly's car arrived at her back door by way of a hidden lane, Emma's first impression of Ffrench-Dobbyn was horrified amazement. He looked as if the mob had not only captured but tortured him, for he was bent into an approximation of a pretzel and seemed unable to straighten out.

“The boot was even smaller than the place I had him in,” Milly explained. “But I could hardly have let him sit in a seat, where he might have been observed.”

Aided by the housebot, who was exceptionally strong, the two ladies got the twisted man onto Emma's sofa, where he lay moaning softly, his knees pressed against his chin. One ankle was bent very oddly, and his arms had disappeared among the folds of his torso like the ends of the famous Gordian Knot.

“Actually, he's quite two meters high when stretched out,” said Milly. “I just don't know how to get him unraveled.”

“I do,” said Emma, “for I used to assist dear Father when he slept crookedly and got a wry neck. You go along, dear; early-bird lovers may

already be lining up at your door, and you know how prone men are to start fights when competing for the favors of the fair."

After Milly had left, Emma ordered the housebot to fetch heating pads, witch hazel, and a warm iron. With these simple implements, she gradually loosened Ffrench-Dobbyn up, until he was lying flat on the sofa and whispering his thanks. Meantime the housebot had brewed tea, and a hot sweet strong cuppa quickly completed his recovery.

"Thank you so much, Miss — Mrs — "

"Miss Smythe-Denby. You had, I understand, rather a close call of it."

"I couldn't have imagined that our fellow-citizens were capable of such violence! Never, never shall I forget the howls of the hunters, nor the baying of the beagles."

"You were attempting to take away your neighbors' livelihood," she pointed out. "That does tend to exasperate people."

He sighed. "I suppose so. I must admit that I never gave sufficient weight to that factor. I was seeking the general good, and expected others to see things as I do."

"How can you expect them to see your point of view, if you ignore theirs?" asked Emma severely. "In any case, I've noticed that the general good means very little to most of us, if it entails a private disaster."

To this he returned no answer. He knew he was in the wrong, and she was somewhat surprised to see that he made no attempt to wriggle out by making excuses. That indicated greater maturity than she would have expected from a schoolmaster, and so she gave up her plans to berate him further, saying only:

"But enough of all that. I hope you will try to rest, after what must have been a most trying experience. Are you perhaps hungry?"

"As a matter of fact," he admitted, "I'm starving."

Promptly Emma put on her favorite apron over her tweeds and made him a good breakfast with eggs, toast, a rasher of bacon and a fresh pot of jam. Though tempted to point out that everything he was wolfing down had come from the same Micromarket that he wanted to close, she firmly rejected the temptation to crow over this beaten man.

Instead, when he was full, and looking quite human if a bit dishevelled, she asked if he needed anything else.

Ffrench-Dobbyn thoughtfully rubbed his bristly chin and muttered,

"If I might just clean up a bit — unfortunately, I haven't got my razor or a change of clothes — "

"I've kept all Father's personal items just as he left them," she replied, "and he was not unlike you in size. You will find his bathroom at the head of the stairs, and I shall bring you a razor and some clean — er, some clean things."

She meant underwear, of which the Colonel had owned an enormous supply, including many brand-new combinations, Y-fronts, vests, and singlets that he died without ever having worn. Emma handed a selection of these items in through the quarter-opened door of the bathroom, plus a clean towel and a dressing-gown, receiving in return her guest's smudged and wrinkled clothing, which she gave the housebot to be cleaned and pressed.

Then she went downstairs to think over the many surprises of the morning.

"Just listen to the shower run!" she reflected. "Gentlemen seem to need so much water. But of course they have more to get clean than we do.... I wonder if I should have brought him a washcloth. I suppose not — Milly says that most men don't use them.... Goodness, look at those eggshells! He's got quite an appetite, for the bloodless creature I imagined him to be!"

As she tidied up, she began to reinterpret her adventures of yesterday in light of those of today.

"To think that I was considering the purchase of a love bot, which would never eat, never bathe, never shave, be incapable of suffering, and that consequently would not actually need me — not even for sex. All would be pretense and play-acting. No wonder Milly sticks to human beings, annoying as they often are!"

When Ffrench-Dobbyn emerged from the bath, wrapped in the dressing-gown and looking much improved, she directed him to the Colonel's bedroom to rest, first lowering the shades so that no enemy could spot him. She was heading out to work in the garden when a sound began to emerge from that long-empty room: a sound that was strange and yet — somehow — not strange at all.

"Why," she thought, "he's snoring! Just like Father used to do. How very human of him!"

Then she went after the bindweed, and was quite surprised to find herself singing softly as she dug.

FRENCH-DOBBYN was still being human at noon, and so Emma watched the Satellite News alone. Though concerned mainly with events of planetary significance, the tail end of the program gave a brief summary of what the announcer called "the Alpha Disorders."

With a pang, Emma learned that the heavy-weapons team now had arrived in 1220, and that the village had returned to its accustomed condition of orderly somnolence. So, she thought, *Mr Ffrench-Dobbyn will soon be going home. I wonder if he'll want lunch first?*

But the news hadn't quite finished with the local story.

Among the crimes committed by the mob, the most serious was arson: the cottage belonging to the leader of the Progress Gang (misidentified as "Finch-Dumbkin") had been burned to the ground, and all its contents lost. A fire company from 1616 Alpha had arrived too late to do anything but warm itself by the embers.

An investigation was beginning, but the Constable held out little hope of finding the arsonist(s) in view of the chaotic conditions under which the crime had happened. *Translation*, thought Emma: *He doesn't intend to look very hard.*

But the basic fact was that Mr Ffrench-Dobbyn no longer had a home to go back to.

Emma hated the thought that she must now become the bearer of bad news, and spent some time planning how to break it to him. She decided to make fresh tea and bake a batch of treacle tarts; then, after a nourishing lunch (cold tongue and mince jelly?), a jolt of sugar and caffeine, and a little light talk on this subject or that, she would say gently: "Martin, I am afraid that I have some rather distressing news for you...you have been burned out of house and home."

Suddenly she paused, startled by her own thoughts. Martin? Had their friendship progressed far enough that she could properly address him as Martin?

After reflection, she decided to do exactly that. He would be in need of a friendly word. Besides, a man who had showered in the upstairs

bathroom and was wearing Father's underclothes could not be entirely the stranger that he had been, only this morning.

As matters turned out, all her thought and preparations were needless, for Martin slept through the afternoon. It was past Seventeen when at last she heard him stirring about — and by then, new and terrible news had arrived via the Telly.

The Village Council, after listening to some impassioned words from 1220's most substantial citizens — meaning the many enemies of the Progress Gang — resolved that the mob had exercised "the right, nay the duty of free Britons to defend hearth, home and livelihood against any who might threaten their ancient liberties."

The Council then ordered the Constable to arrest all Gangsters on sight, upon a charge of "provoking public disorder," and offered a reward for their capture.

"Why," Emma exclaimed in outrage, "this is a legal lynching! We have descended to the level of the Americans, and almost to that of the French!"

She was gazing moodily at a news item reporting the total destruction by a vast earthquake of the abandoned city of Los Angeles — which fortunately had resulted in no casualties — when a flash from 1315 Alpha put the cap on a day of extraordinary happenings. The Schools Committee of that village had discharged and blacklisted Martin as a "criminous disturber of the peace."

At this moment she heard him descending the stairs. Neatly turned out, he looked rested, fit and strong — but the smile faded from his lips, when his eyes fell upon Emma and he saw that hers were brimming with tears.

What was to be done?

Long into the night, Martin and Emma sat, canvassing the possibilities. Clearly, he was the victim of a great injustice; a solicitor must be retained, and the action of the Village Council reversed by the courts.

At first Martin proposed to go to the Constable and give himself up. But Emma had had plenty of time to think over the situation, and vetoed this proposal at once.

"No, Martin," she said firmly. "You shall not put yourself into the

power of your enemies until British Law has once more asserted its majesty, and your right to a fair trial, far from the bigots of 1220, has been assured!"

"I have no place to live," he pointed out grimly, "no possessions, and no means of livelihood. What shall I do?"

"Remain here," she replied promptly. "I shall go to Town, contact a solicitor, and place your case in his capable hands. Meantime you may occupy Father's room, whose masculine ambiance suits you so well, and utilize his wardrobe, which I have no personal need of. No one resides in this house save myself and my housebot, and I shall embed commands in its memory to prevent it from gossiping about you with other bots of the neighborhood."

"What about your friend, Milly?"

"I shall tell her that you have escaped and are preparing your defense from some refuge in the Beta, or even the Gamma, time zone."

"And meantime I must remain a prisoner in this house, afraid even to show my face!"

"Only for a little while. Soon you will be able to come and go as you please."

"How can that be, with a price on my head?"

"Listen, and I shall tell you."

The Hot Bot Spot!

Hesitating on the walk outside the garishly lighted store — all the furious traffic of Mulling Crucis roaring past the kerb behind her — Emma reflected how happy she would have been, never to see the horrid place again!

She'd put off her visit as long as she could. After arriving in Town by omnibus, she had first visited the firm of solicitors (Jawse, Fickel & Blather) who had prepared her father's will and done other legal chores for him.

Her business there went quickly: in return for a substantial retainer, Mr Blather promised that within a few days such a barrage of writs and torts would descend upon the Village Council that its members would wish they had never heard the name of Martin Ffrench-Dobbyn; further, that when the case came to trial, his favorite barrister (a Scotsman bearing

the evocative name of Angus McGrit) should defend Martin with eloquence and fire.

This task completed, Emma had felt justified in providing herself an exotic yet substantial lunch at Chow's Oriental. But after the fortune cookie had been disposed of, she had no further legitimate reason for delay: she must return to the wretched purveyor of artificial lovers, and attempt to learn certain things she needed to know in order to carry out the next step of her plan.

So, stiffening her spine, she gripped the Hot Bot Spot's ornate door handle, drew a deep breath, and marched inside.

At once the owner sidled up: a dingy-looking little man hailing from an obscure Eurasian tribal region, where the people spent most of their time weaving rugs and practicing infanticide. He was constantly rubbing his palms together — which might have done him some good, Emma thought, if only he'd had a piece of soap between them!

"Yess, lady?" he articulated greasily. "Haven't I seen you in here before?"

"Quite right," she answered. "I have not yet made up my mind whether to buy or not, and I thought that another view of your stock might help me to decide."

"Oh, yess, lady, go ahead and look. Everybody say my bots are most artistic."

"Quite. Especially that extraordinary skin substitute they wear. It is so distinctive — makes human skin look drab and a trifle unreal by comparison. Might I ask what it is? Or is that a trade secret?"

"No, lady, all superior bots use it. It is called dermaplast, and was developed by eminent physicians to promote healing in people who get burned up. It breathes," he said, and demonstrated by inhaling and exhaling several times.

"And the hair — is it plastic, too?"

"No, the hair is real human hair. The head hair is real head hair; the armpits hair is real armpits hair; and the public hair is —"

"I see," said Emma hastily. How like a foreigner to tell you either too little, or else entirely too much!

"And the eyes," she went on. "So lovely, and the constantly changing expressions — it all looks so real! How is it done?"

The little man became professional, revealing a sharp mind beneath his unattractive exterior. "The bot's sensors receive cues from its sex partner that activate pre-set algorithms. Fuzzy logic does the rest. Most people are pretty stereotyped when they f— make love, so the bot learns quickly how to respond."

"In short," she remarked acidly, "when a person makes love with a bot, both are enacting the roles of real people."

"Precisely, precisely," he enthused, showing off a row of badly stained teeth. "And a lovely, beautiful bot is so much superior to the 'real thing' — if, in fact, there is in love such a thing as a real thing, which I doubt!"

Suppressing her disgust at this sentiment — one of the most unethical she'd ever heard — Emma put him off with promises she did not intend to keep, and left the shop feeling that she needed a bath worse than Martin ever had.

Yet she had learned what she needed to know. She would ask the Nurse Bot to order her a couple of square meters of dermaplast from a Medical Supply Depot. Then her own skills, honed in years of volunteer work at the Playhouse, would enable her to shape a convincing mask and sew a pair of gloves for Martin to wear when he appeared in public. So accoutered, she saw no reason why he should not imitate a bot successfully for as long as he might need to.

"I should like to name his new persona Roderick," she meditated, while riding back on the omnibus. "I was thinking of Heathcliff, but I've never considered Emily Brontë characters to be entirely *nice*. I shall wait to ask Martin what he thinks of the name until some evening when he's had a good meal, ending with one of my treacle tarts, which he seems to like so much!" As to the metaphysical question of whether a man pretending to be a bot was any realer than a bot pretending to be a man, Emma was willing to bet the answer was yes.

The news that 1220 Alpha's most persistent spinster had acquired a love bot was a nine-days' wonder in the village.

Of course Milly put the item on her Instantmail, and soon villages in places as far away as Oklahoma (in the Tau time-zone) and Côte d'Ivoire (Omega) were debating the subject of human/bot passion.

Meantime, a legal action filed on Martin's behalf by Mr Blather began moving slowly through the courts. Needless to say, judges, jurors, attorneys, and witnesses did not actually meet. All attended the trial virtually, from wherever they happened to be at the time, through a technology derived from the conference calls of the ancient world.

Roderick/Martin — after removing his mask — gave testimony from Emma's parlor, speaking into her Tellyphone against a backdrop she'd painted for a performance of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Trial by Jury*. (Thus the Constable could not recognize where he was, and come after him.) From the beginning things went swimmingly. Martin's profession as a schoolmaster served him well, for he was used to speaking publicly and authoritatively. When the Council members were called to testify, Mr McGrit (tuning in from the shores of Loch Ness, where he was salmon-fishing) in savage cross-examination utterly demolished their absurd attempt to portray the villains of the Disorders as its victims, and vice versa.

As a result, the court (meaning Mr Justice Jeffreys, who was seeking Enlightenment in an Indian ashram at the time) quashed the warrant for Martin's arrest, and scathingly denounced both the Council and the Constable for violating the basic human right to disrupt public business, and make an infernal nuisance of oneself.

The Council appealed the verdict, and for a time the proceedings severely strained Emma's finances. But when a series of adverse decisions forced water rates to be raised to continue the battle, its members were voted out of office. The new Council not only rescinded the obnoxious acts of its predecessor, but agreed to pay Martin and the other Gangsters reasonable damages by putting a small tax on beer.

Good news followed from other quarters: after much foot-dragging, his insurance company (Lloyd's of Mulling Crucis) paid the claim for his house, while the Schools Committee of 1315 Alpha bowed to the inevitable and bought out Martin's contract for a good round sum, plus interest. By then three years had passed since the night of the Disorders. The villagers had gotten used to Roderick, while the disappearance of Martin Ffrench-Dobbyn had long ceased to be a matter of comment. When in their cups, beer-drinkers were heard to mutter that the bugger hadn't better come back, neither: they were paying him tribute every time a pint was

served at the Gnashing Tusk or the King's Evil, and they didn't like it, not 'arf they didn't.

As for Roderick, he'd gotten used to his new persona, and kept it even when he no longer had to. As he once admitted to Emma, he felt more like a man when he was a bot, than he had when he was a schoolmaster.

MEANWHILE, IN the privacy of her cottage their relationship ripened and matured.

In close daily contact, she found him almost as silent as he had been when staging demonstrations. The exception was when he had information to impart; he did not precisely converse, he lectured (and, to do him justice, listened with careful attention to her replies).

Both of them enjoyed having the company of an intellectual equal: he had lived surrounded by childish people, including both real children and his fellow teachers, Emma had a firm friend in Milly, and many acquaintances amongst the ladies of 1220, but none who valued abstract thought as she did. So both found a new pleasure in intellectual intercourse.

The same could not be said of the other kind. In matters of passion, Roderick was maddeningly slow to take hints — or to take action — although a congested something about his face encouraged Emma to hope that banked fires might burn, deep within. She understood the suffering and resentment which his dependence on her had caused his male ego. But surely that ought to have vanished when his enemies paid off, and he was able not only to repay everything she had invested in him, but out of the damages he had won from the Council to take over most of their household expenses as well!

Then what was the problem? Could it be...could it be that Roderick was of the Mauve persuasion?

Not that Emma held any vulgar prejudices against those who are attracted to their own sex. She felt deeply loyal to the King, who was one such, and — despite her firm Anglicanism — respected the Pope, who was another. Yet what a cruel irony if the one man in the world she hoped was not Mauve, turned out to be!

In the end she decided to make the best of what she had. At any rate, she was no longer lonely, and their lengthy period of adjustment had given

the housemates time to become entirely comfortable in each other's company. They shared both tasks and pleasures: Roderick had become an exemplary handy-man, while Emma improved constantly in the arts of housewifery. She made it a practice to keep him supplied with tasty food, believing that men like pythons are safest to have around when their bellies are full. To disguise the fact that she was now feeding two mouths rather than one, she took to ordering supplementary supplies from the Depot at Mulling Crucis, thereby getting access to a far greater variety of raw materials than could be had from the spare and flyblown shelves of 1220's Micromarket. (In this respect, it seemed that the Progress Gang might have been onto something.)

As a result, her cooking became ever more ample, varied, and delicious, with emphasis on such traditional dishes as clear soups, Dover soles from the Sussex fish farms, roast joints, London broils, Yorkshire puddings, steak and kidney pies, and fresh berries with Devonshire clotted cream. And never any shortage of hot tea and treacle tarts!

To control his expanding waistline (a problem unknown to real bots, and therefore requiring concealment) Roderick took day-long rambles with Emma over the downs, wolds, meres, fens, holts, and tors that cluttered a neighboring heath. They became a familiar sight to the villagers, and Roderick's slow, stiff strides — so reminiscent of the classic TD (for Two-Dimensional) *Frankenstein* movies on late-night Telly — actually made him seem more, rather than less, convincing as a bot.

One evening, after a long ramble during which she'd gathered wild-flowers while Roderick discoursed on the botany and geology of the heath, they returned home, ate a delicious cold supper, and then relaxed at their ease in the parlor, sipping an elderly Madeira from crystal goblets.

The Telly sat cold and dead, for neither enjoyed it much. Their evenings were devoted to digestion, intelligent conversation, and reading aloud — of late, from the works of Jane Austen. After a chapter of *Sense and Sensibility*, Emma asked Roderick why the leisurely fiction of the nineteenth century seemed to speak to modern people so much more than the fevered rantings of the twentieth and twenty-first.

"Perhaps," he suggested, "because the way we live today is closer to the rural life of an earlier time than to the urban madness of a later one."

"Precisely what I think!" she exclaimed. "Though I could never have expressed it so succinctly and clearly. Do let me have one more tiny drop of Madeira. I am so glad that you agreed to select the vintage: you are a connoisseur, whilst I," she smiled, "am merely an imbiber."

"With pleasure," answered the connoisseur, preening a bit as he added wine to her glass.

"A beaker full of the warm South," she quoted dreamily.

By now she had grown so used to Roderick, and so comfortable in his presence, that for a time she entirely forgot he was there. Warm and muzzy with Madeira, her mind drifted into pleasant thoughts of her childhood, recipes she meant to try out, the question of whether peonies could be made to grow in her garden, and the mysterious ways of Providence.

She did not know that exercise, food, and wine had combined to bring a warm blush to her once-pale skin, nor that the few kilos she had added to her weight made her figure appear less angular, more rounded, more — if the word might be used in such a context — appetizing.

She did not notice that Roderick was staring at her. Was he, perhaps, seeing her in a whole new light?

Suddenly he cleared his throat; she woke from her postprandial trance, and turned to face him.

For a startled, timeless moment they gazed deep into each other's eyes. He was still wearing his mask, and his double identity — the eyes of a living man burning through the faintly iridescent faux flesh of a bot — affected her so strangely that for half a minute she neglected to breathe. This was Roderick — her Roderick — the man she had saved, named, almost invented!

"You cannot imagine, Emma, how much I enjoy imparting knowledge to you," he whispered huskily.

"Oh Roderick," she murmured, turning her glowing face once more aside, "you are so inspiring a teacher, that I would gladly learn anything from you — anything — anything you might wish to impart!"

"Emma!" he exclaimed, grasping her two small hands with his large ones.

"Roderick!"

They embraced, and for the first time tasted each other's lips. Their

goblets rolled across the floor unheeded, baptizing the rug with a few remaining drops of wine; from the corner where it stood when not in use, the housebot gawked at human behavior it had never before observed.

Neither cared. Roderick had gathered Emma into his arms, and despite her increased weight, was even then ascending the stairs with a rapidity very unlike his usual deliberate stride.

Needless to say, not a hint of these events made it into anybody's Instantmail.

Even Milly — *especially* Milly — received no hint of the changed conditions within her friend's house. And yet, experienced as she was in matters of the heart, she could not fail to observe a new glow and richness in Emma's complexion, a lilt and lightness in her step, a Mona Lisa-like smile that sometimes played over her lips when she felt that she was unobserved.

"I see!" Milly said to herself, leaping to an obvious albeit false conclusion. "She got Roderick merely as a companion, but now she's had him retrofitted!"

Secure in this delusion (which, to be fair, accorded with all the facts as she knew them), Milly was totally unprepared for the news that Emma whispered in her ear, one day when they happened to meet in High Street.

"Oh, my dear!" Milly exclaimed. "Do let me have a small gathering for you in the Igloo — a very small group of our true friends only!"

"So kind of you," Emma murmured.

Invitations quickly went out, and on the day appointed a dozen ladies of 1220 Alpha arrived at Milly's, bearing gifts done up in large or small boxes tied with white ribbons. Emma awaited them, seated upon the scarlet banquette — a figure still tall, but more ample than of yore — her full, rosy face smiling like the traditional Cat that drank the Cream.

They fell upon her neck, and to their amazement found her now ready to engage in the behavior that is customary at such gatherings — lots of huggy-kissy, shrieks of laughter, and synchronized weeping.

Roderick had accompanied Emma, but declined with a somewhat stiff and formal shake of the head Milly's invitation to join the party. Instead, having given the ladies a brief greeting in his resonant voice — a

voice that awakened vague memories in Milly, though she could not place it exactly — he left the house.

Shortly afterward she spied him through a window, stalking stiff-limbed up the village High Street, having fled (just like a real male!) from the baby shower going on in the Igloo.

"My Lord," whispered Milly to herself, as she prepared to serve her guests tea and seed cake, "these new bots are absolutely *incredible!*"



COMING ATTRACTIONS

LAST YEAR, Laird Barron crept out a lot of readers with his acclaimed story about one man's search for the photos in "The Imago Sequence." Next month he follows it up with another engrossing exploration of the darker side of the universe, "Hallucigenia."

The rest of the issue isn't definite yet, but if the stars are in alignment, we'll have two stories next month about humans dealing with the animal kingdom, compliments of C. S. Friedman and Albert Cowdrey.

We can assure you that we'll have more great stories for you in the next few issues, including Peter S. Beagle's "El Regalo," John Morressy's latest Kedrigern caper, "Pop Squad" by Paolo Bacigalupi, and a new fantasy by Ysabeau S. Wilce. Subscribe now (before rates increase) and make sure you won't miss an issue.



FILMS

KATHI MAIO

IT LOOKS LARGER IN A SMALL BOX

WHEN telling a story that is futuristic or fantastical, it is useful to keep it familiar as well. Without an adequate frame of reference, the reader or viewer won't be able to "relate." And as much as sf and fantasy fans want to experience new realms and possibilities, we also want any brave new world to speak to the world we know. We want the form of the tale to be recognizable, and we want to see ourselves reflected in even an alien creature or wee elf.

Creating something at once familiar and fresh is the hard part.

Sf filmmakers attempt this feat by putting a new spin on familiar formulas. And because film is their medium, the formulas they utilize have less to do with the traditions of science fiction novels than they do with the conventions

of moviemaking. Film genres that have been in heavy rotation since the days of silent cinema are simply customized with monstrous creatures and space men.

Although the costumes and makeup might be different, and the stated time period might be way before or far beyond the present day, most science fiction films (if you strip away the prehistoric or space age props) are extraordinarily reminiscent of age-old movie formulas like the swash-buckler adventure, the cowboy western, and the brothers-in-arms war drama.

Of course, when most filmmakers change a sword to a light saber, they are hoping you won't notice that they are basically remaking a movie that came out in 1922. But I think if you're going to steal, be honest about it. Which is why I enjoyed Joss Whedon's short-lived

Fox television series, *Firefly*, as well as its hero.

Whedon, who is best known as the creative force behind *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*, went in a much different direction with *Firefly*, which was a space cowboys adventure series set five hundred years in the future.

And when I say space cowboys, I mean it. Whedon—who admits to having been inspired by Michael Shaara's Pulitzer prize-winning novel about Gettysburg and the American Civil War, *The Killer Angels*—makes no pretense about the hodgepodge of formulas he utilizes in his series. Primary among them is the great American Western yarn. And if you had any doubt that the series' hero, Captain Mal Reynolds (Nathan Fillion) is basically a futuristic version of the standard non-conforming, reluctantly heroic, two-fisted brawling cowpoke hero, Whedon and his team spell it out in no uncertain terms. Mal wears britches and boots and a long duster coat, and keeps his six-shooter strapped to his hip. And his misadventures include an occasional foray into cattle-rustling (transporting cattle from one planet to another) and the shoot-out defense of a beleaguered desert brothel (against a prairie town strongman

who uses a laser gun and a hovercraft). All set to a score of bluegrass-laden world music!

Whedon and his writing team also had fun mixing in additional genres like the battlefront buddy drama, and exhibited a consistently playful attitude toward the anachronisms of their weekly tales.

For those of you who never saw *Firefly* during its on-again, off-again broadcasts in the fall of 2002, and who have yet to buy or rent the DVDs of the series, more explanation is in order.

As humans spread throughout the universe, settling and "terraforming" barren moons and planets, two dominant human cultures, American and Chinese, formed the basis of a new world order "Alliance" of intergalactic government hegemony. During the War for Unification, "Independents" tried to resist Alliance social control. Mal Reynolds had been a valiant soldier for the Independents. As was his always-got-yer-back buddy from the trenches, Zoe Alleyne (Gina Torres).

As a surviving and cynical loser in a civil war, Mal can't accept life on the civilized and heavily controlled "Core" planets. Instead, he refurbishes an old space transport ship, a member of the *Firefly* class that he dubs *Serenity*. Then he takes

to a life of petty crime and semi-ethical skullduggery shuttling between various less-controlled outer rim planets. (These dusty planets and their inhabitants lead hard-scrabble lives that look amazingly like that of the Wild West of American movie lore.)

Mal's crew and shipboard family consists of his right-hand woman Zoe, her husband, a less-than-macho ace pilot named Wash (Alan Tudyk), a former farmgirl and brilliant mechanic named Kaylee (Jewel Staite), a tough-as-nails and more than a little mercenary sharpshooter named Jayne (Adam Baldwin), and a fellow traveler, in her own lusciously appointed and semi-detached shuttle, a courtesan or "companion" called Inara Serra (Morena Baccarin). And, finally, while taking on passengers for a little extra money, the crew expands to include a celibate man of the cloth, Shepherd Book (Ron Glass), and a formerly privileged young doctor, Simon Tam (Sean Maher), who became a fugitive after freeing his genius but seriously disturbed teen-aged sister, River (Summer Glau), from a secret government program. (River also boards the *Serenity*.)

That's a lot of characters to develop and keep busy, but despite Fox Network pressures to keep the

action dominant, Whedon and writing cohorts Tim Minear, Ben Edlund, Jose Molina, Jane Espenson, Drew Z. Greenberg, Cheryl Cain, and Brett Matthews kept the fist fights, shoot-outs, and chase scenes nicely balanced with comedy and drama, fleshing out their nine-person ensemble as they went along.

The overt fusion of cultures (characters speak in twangy English and curse in Mandarin) and filmic formulas somehow worked in *Firefly*. The result was an entertaining and even endearing series that few people ever saw.

Fans being what they are, the small community of *Firefly* devotees (who called themselves Brown-coats, in honor of their hero's rebel outerwear), didn't calmly accept the writing on the wall as Fox preempted and then canceled the series. (Three of the fourteen completed episodes never aired.) They blogged, rallied at sf and comic conventions, created internet forums and letter writing campaigns, and even bought ads advocating for the show's renewal, pick up by another network, or transfer to the large screen.

As any Trekker can testify, the power of an enthusiastic fan base should not be underestimated. And as any Douglas Adams fan must

admit, neither can it be overestimated. A reliable group of devotees can guarantee you a good opening weekend, but a movie will not succeed — monetarily or culturally — unless it can also attract and engross viewers beyond pre-ordained fanatics.

So, the Browncoats helped Joss Whedon get his *Firefly* saga to Universal, who greenlighted a modestly budgeted feature. But the Browncoats could not make the resulting Autumn 2005 movie, *Serenity*, a hit.

Folks in the business of explaining away failure would probably say that *Serenity* fizzled in theaters because it had no big name stars. And, indeed, that might be part of the problem. Hollywood features these days are star vehicles — which is why untalented people like Tom Cruise get paid so much money for their middling performances.

But the real reason *Serenity* didn't pack in audiences is that it's not a very good movie. As someone who has watched every episode of the *Firefly* series (even the three that never aired but which are included on the DVD set), I'll readily admit that the film has its moments. And the plot, which involves much of the backstory of young River's psychotic breaks, as well as

nefarious government experiments on a mysterious far-off planet that helped create the series' bogeymen, the cannibalistic Reavers, is not completely uninteresting.

But if I hadn't been familiar with the Captain and his crew, and witnessed their previous outcast adventures, I would have found *Serenity* to be a pedestrian space western with too much dizzying action and not nearly enough character development.

It's almost as if Joss Whedon, who wrote and directed *Serenity* in his feature debut, knew that he didn't have time to elucidate all nine of his lead characters. A couple, like the beauteous Inara, are kept off-ship for most of the movie, and are given only blips of single scenes in what amounts to bit parts. Others (spoiler alert!) are given short shrift and then are summarily killed off.

Except for Captain Reynolds, and possibly the troubled River (who has unaccountably become a ninja-on-speed warrior since we saw her last), there is no character explication to speak of. And that's a disservice not only to new viewers, but also for *Firefly* fans who know how engaging and well cast this group of characters is.

All that Captain fixation got

me feeling quite cranky after a while. If I wanted to see a *Star Trek* movie, I'd watch one. In a *Firefly* film I wanted the ensemble to work together fully in service of their story.

To be fair, even if the regular cast members got to do little more than stand around, scowling and bleeding, at least there were a couple of new characters who were introduced in the movie and are worthy of comment. One is the villain of the piece, a government operative/assassin played by Chiwetel Ejiofor (who was so good in *Dirty, Pretty Things*). This calm and courtly man is a self-acknowledged "monster" who is willing to do anything to support his government, which he truly believes is working to make a better world. (There must be a lesson here. Make a note, somebody.)

The other intriguing character is just a bit part, but a lively and entertaining one. And that is David Krumholtz (CBS's brilliant *Num-b3rs* mathematician), who appears briefly as Mr. Universe, a media hacker who believes that "you can't stop the signal."

But two new characters can't make up for the lack of quality time with the regular cast. And there was no time for them because of the need

for non-stop sword-guttings and widespread slaughter.

Sadly, it seems certain that Whedon listened too carefully to the suits at Fox who told him to pump up the action. No doubt the folks at Universal made the same pointed suggestion. Hence, tiny underfed River becomes something out of a hopped-up version of *The Matrix*. She kicks and slashes her way through a couple dozen very large and fierce Reavers until there's nothing but a pile of bodies on the floor. And as for the spaceship chase scenes and dogfights, Whedon's preference for zooming and jittery handheld camera work — occasionally used in the TV series — is now full-blown and completely stomach-churning.

The unremitting violence and action don't make for a better story or a better movie, they simply make *Serenity* come off like every other two-bit steroid-pumped sf adventure movie you've ever seen.

I wanted to see the *Firefly* series get a second chance — until I saw how Joss Whedon compromised his vision, translating it to the big screen. The leisurely pace of a dramatic series suited Whedon's concept and characters. The show filled the small screen and made a real impact — even if it was, originally,

on too small a group of audience members.

But that's the great thing about DVD. Now folks who missed their very brief chance to catch the series when it aired can rent or buy the

entire set of DVDs and work their way through all fourteen quite entertaining episodes. Watch the follow-up film afterward, if you must. But do yourself a favor; don't start with the movie, *Serenity*. ☞

SPECULATIONS

A DECAYING ECONOMY FORCES CONSOLIDATION OF HOLIDAYS.



MERRY
EVERYTHING!
NOW GET BACK
TO WORK!

honey

The growing legions of Ms. Rickert's fans will be pleased to know that a collection of her stories entitled Map of Dreams will be published later this year. Her latest finds her in fine form.

Journey into the Kingdom

By M. Rickert

THE FIRST PAINTING WAS of an egg, the pale ovoid produced with faint strokes of pink, blue, and violet to create the illusion of white. After

that there were two apples, a pear, an avocado, and finally, an empty plate on a white tablecloth before a window covered with gauzy curtains, a single fly nestled in a fold at the top right corner. The series was titled "Journey into the Kingdom."

On a small table beneath the avocado there was a black binder, an unevenly cut rectangle of white paper with the words "Artist's Statement" in neat, square, hand-written letters taped to the front. Balancing the porcelain cup and saucer with one hand, Alex picked up the binder and took it with him to a small table against the wall toward the back of the coffee shop, where he opened it, thinking it might be interesting to read something besides the newspaper for once, though he almost abandoned the idea when he saw that the page before him was handwritten in the same neat letters as on the cover. But the title intrigued him.

AN IMITATION LIFE

THOUGH I ALWAYS enjoyed my crayons and watercolors, I was not a particularly artistic child. I produced the usual assortment of stick figures and houses with dripping yellow suns. I was an avid collector of seashells and sea glass and much preferred to be outdoors, throwing stones at seagulls (please, no haranguing from animal rights activists, I have long since outgrown this) or playing with my imaginary friends to sitting quietly in the salt rooms of the keeper's house, making pictures at the big wooden kitchen table while my mother, in her black dress, kneaded bread and sang the old French songs between her duties as lighthouse keeper, watcher over the waves, beacon for the lost, governess of the dead.

The first ghost to come to my mother was my own father who had set out the day previous in the small boat heading to the mainland for supplies such as string and rice, and also bags of soil, which, in years past, we emptied into crevices between the rocks and planted with seeds, a makeshift garden and a "brave attempt," as my father called it, referring to the barren stone we lived on.

We did not expect him for several days so my mother was surprised when he returned in a storm, dripping wet icicles from his mustache and behaving strangely, repeating over and over again, "It is lost, my dear Maggie, the garden is at the bottom of the sea."

My mother fixed him hot tea but he refused it, she begged him to take off the wet clothes and retire with her, to their feather bed piled with quilts, but he said, "Tend the light, don't waste your time with me." So my mother, a worried expression on her face, left our little keeper's house and walked against the gale to the lighthouse, not realizing that she left me with a ghost, melting before the fire into a great puddle, which was all that was left of him upon her return. She searched frantically while I kept pointing at the puddle and insisting it was he. Eventually she tied on her cape and went out into the storm, calling his name. I thought that, surely, I would become orphaned that night.

But my mother lived, though she took to her bed and left me to tend

the lamp and receive the news of the discovery of my father's wrecked boat, found on the rocky shoals, still clutching in his frozen hand a bag of soil, which was given to me, and which I brought to my mother though she would not take the offering.

For one so young, my chores were immense. I tended the lamp, and kept our own hearth fire going too. I made broth and tea for my mother, which she only gradually took, and I planted that small bag of soil by the door to our little house, savoring the rich scent, wondering if those who lived with it all the time appreciated its perfume or not.

I did not really expect anything to grow, though I hoped that the seagulls might drop some seeds or the ocean deposit some small thing. I was surprised when, only weeks later, I discovered the tiniest shoots of green, which I told my mother about. She was not impressed. By that point, she would spend part of the day sitting up in bed, mending my father's socks and moaning, "Agatha, whatever are we going to do?" I did not wish to worry her, so I told her lies about women from the mainland coming to help, men taking turns with the light. "But they are so quiet. I never hear anyone."

"No one wants to disturb you," I said. "They whisper and walk on tiptoe."

It was only when I opened the keeper's door so many uncounted weeks later, and saw, spread before me, embedded throughout the rock (even in crevices where I had planted no soil) tiny pink, purple, and white flowers, their stems shuddering in the salty wind, that I insisted my mother get out of bed.

She was resistant at first. But I begged and cajoled, promised her it would be worth her effort. "The fairies have planted flowers for us," I said, this being the only explanation or description I could think of for the infinitesimal blossoms everywhere.

Reluctantly, she followed me through the small living room and kitchen, observing that, "the ladies have done a fairly good job of keeping the place neat." She hesitated before the open door. The bright sun and salty scent of the sea, as well as the loud sound of waves washing all around us, seemed to astound her, but then she squinted, glanced at me, and stepped through the door to observe the miracle of the fairies' flowers.

Never had the rock seen such color, never had it known such bloom! My mother walked out, barefoot, and said, "Forget-me-nots, these are forget-me-nots. But where...?"

I told her that I didn't understand it myself, how I had planted the small bag of soil found clutched in my father's hand but had not really expected it to come to much, and certainly not to all of this, waving my arm over the expanse, the flowers having grown in soilless crevices and cracks, covering our entire little island of stone.

My mother turned to me and said, "These are not from the fairies, they are from him." Then she started crying, a reaction I had not expected and tried to talk her out of, but she said, "No, Agatha, leave me alone."

She stood out there for quite a while, weeping as she walked amongst the flowers. Later, after she came inside and said, "Where are all the helpers today?" I shrugged and avoided more questions by going outside myself, where I discovered scarlet spots amongst the bloom. My mother had been bedridden for so long, her feet had gone soft again. For days she left tiny teardrop shapes of blood in her step, which I surreptitiously wiped up, not wanting to draw any attention to the fact, for fear it would dismay her. She picked several of the forget-me-not blossoms and pressed them between the heavy pages of her book of myths and folklore. Not long after that, a terrible storm blew in, rocking our little house, challenging our resolve, and taking with it all the flowers. Once again our rock was barren. I worried what effect this would have on my mother but she merely sighed, shrugged, and said, "They were beautiful, weren't they, Agatha?"

So passed my childhood: a great deal of solitude, the occasional life-threatening adventure, the drudgery of work, and all around me the great wide sea with its myriad secrets and reasons, the lost we saved, those we didn't. And the ghosts, brought to us by my father, though we never understood clearly his purpose, as they only stood before the fire, dripping and melting like something made of wax, bemoaning what was lost (a fine boat, a lady love, a dream of the sea, a pocketful of jewels, a wife and children, a carving on bone, a song, its lyrics forgotten). We tried to provide what comfort we could, listening, nodding, there was little else we could do, they refused tea or blankets, they seemed only to want to stand by the

fire, mourning their death, as my father stood sentry beside them, melting into salty puddles that we mopped up with clean rags, wrung out into the ocean, saying what we fashioned as prayer, or reciting lines of Irish poetry.

Though I know now that this is not a usual childhood, it was usual for me, and it did not veer from this course until my mother's hair had gone quite gray and I was a young woman, when my father brought us a different sort of ghost entirely, a handsome young man, his eyes the same blue-green as summer. His hair was of indeterminate color, wet curls that hung to his shoulders. Dressed simply, like any dead sailor, he carried about him an air of being educated more by art than by water, a suspicion soon confirmed for me when he refused an offering of tea by saying, "No, I will not, cannot drink your liquid offered without first asking for a kiss, ah a kiss is all the liquid I desire, come succor me with your lips."

Naturally, I blushed and, just as naturally, when my mother went to check on the lamp, and my father had melted into a mustached puddle, I kissed him. Though I should have been warned by the icy chill, as certainly I should have been warned by the fact of my own father, a mere puddle at the hearth, it was my first kiss and it did not feel deadly to me at all, not dangerous, not spectral, most certainly not spectral, though I did experience a certain pleasant floating sensation in its wake.

My mother was surprised, upon her return, to find the lad still standing, as vigorous as any living man, beside my father's puddle. We were both surprised that he remained throughout the night, regaling us with stories of the wild sea populated by whales, mermaids, and sharks, mesmerizing us with descriptions of the "bottom of the world" as he called it, embedded with strange purple rocks, pink shells spewing pearls, and the seaweed tendrils of sea witches' hair. We were both surprised that, when the black of night turned to the gray hue of morning, he bowed to each of us (turned fully toward me, so that I could receive his wink), promised he would return, and then left, walking out the door like any regular fellow. So convincing was he that my mother and I opened the door to see where he had gone, scanning the rock and the inky sea before we accepted that, as odd as it seemed, as vigorous his demeanor, he was a ghost most certainly.

"Or something of that nature," said my mother. "Strange that he didn't melt like the others." She squinted at me and I turned away from her before she could see my blush. "We shouldn't have let him keep us up all night," she said. "We aren't dead. We need our sleep."

Sleep? Sleep? I could not sleep, feeling as I did his cool lips on mine, the power of his kiss, as though he breathed out of me some dark aspect that had weighed inside me. I told my mother that she could sleep. I would take care of everything. She protested, but using the past as reassurance (she had long since discovered that I had run the place while she convalesced after my father's death), finally agreed.

I was happy to have her tucked safely in bed. I was happy to know that her curious eyes were closed. I did all the tasks necessary to keep the place in good order. Not even then, in all my girlish giddiness, did I forget the lamp. I am embarrassed to admit, however, it was well past four o'clock before I remembered my father's puddle, which by that time had been much dissipated. I wiped up the small amount of water and wrung him out over the sea, saying only as prayer, "Father, forgive me. Oh, bring him back to me." (Meaning, alas for me, a foolish girl, the boy who kissed me and not my own dear father.)

And that night, he did come back, knocking on the door like any living man, carrying in his wet hands a bouquet of pink coral which he presented to me, and a small white stone, shaped like a star, which he gave to my mother.

"Is there no one else with you?" she asked.

"I'm sorry, there is not," he said.

My mother began to busy herself in the kitchen, leaving the two of us alone. I could hear her in there, moving things about, opening cupboards, sweeping the already swept floor. It was my own carelessness that had caused my father's absence, I was sure of that; had I sponged him up sooner, had I prayed for him more sincerely, and not just for the satisfaction of my own desire, he would be here this night. I felt terrible about this, but then I looked into his eyes, those beautiful sea-colored eyes, and I could not help it, my body thrilled at his look. Is this love? I thought. Will he kiss me twice? When it seemed as if, without even wasting time with words, he was about to do so, leaning toward me with parted lips from which exhaled the scent of salt water, my mother stepped into the room,

clearing her throat, holding the broom before her, as if thinking she might use it as a weapon.

"We don't really know anything about you," she said.

TO BEGIN WITH, my name is Ezekiel. My mother was fond of saints and the Bible and such. She died shortly after giving birth to me, her first and only child. I was raised by my father, on the island of Murano.

Perhaps you have heard of it? Murano glass? We are famous for it throughout the world. My father, himself, was a talented glassmaker. Anything imagined, he could shape into glass. Glass birds, tiny glass bees, glass seashells, even glass tears (an art he perfected while I was an infant), and what my father knew, he taught to me.

Naturally, I eventually surpassed him in skill. Forgive me, but there is no humble way to say it. At any rate, my father had taught me and encouraged my talent all my life. I did not see when his enthusiasm began to sour. I was excited and pleased at what I could produce. I thought he would feel the same for me as I had felt for him, when, as a child, I sat on the footstool in his studio and applauded each glass wing, each hard teardrop.

Alas, it was not to be. My father grew jealous of me. My own father! At night he snuck into our studio and broke my birds, my little glass cakes. In the morning he pretended dismay and instructed me further on keeping air bubbles out of my work. He did not guess that I knew the dismal truth.

I determined to leave him, to sail away to some other place to make my home. My father begged me to stay, "Whatever will you do? How will you make your way in this world?"

I told him my true intention, not being clever enough to lie. "This is not the only place in the world with fire and sand," I said. "I intend to make glass."

He promised me it would be a death sentence. At the time I took this to be only his confused, fatherly concern. I did not perceive it as a threat.

It is true that the secret to glassmaking was meant to remain on Murano. It is true that the entire populace believed this trade, and only this trade, kept them fed and clothed. Finally, it is true that they passed the law (many years before my father confronted me with it) that anyone

who dared attempt to take the secret of glassmaking off the island would suffer the penalty of death. All of this is true.

But what's also true is that I was a prisoner in my own home, tortured by my own father, who pretended to be a humble, kind glassmaker, but who, night after night, broke my creations and then, each morning, denied my accusations, his sweet old face mustached and whiskered, all the expression of dismay and sorrow.

This is madness, I reasoned. How else could I survive? One of us had to leave or die. I chose the gentler course.

We had, in our possession, only a small boat, used for trips that never veered far from shore. Gathering mussels, visiting neighbors, occasionally my father liked to sit in it and smoke a pipe while watching the sun set. He'd light a lantern and come home, smelling of the sea, boil us a pot of soup, a melancholic, completely innocent air about him, only later to sneak about his breaking work.

This small boat is what I took for my voyage across the sea. I also took some fishing supplies, a rope, dried cod he'd stored for winter, a blanket, and several jugs of red wine, given to us by the baker, whose daughter, I do believe, fancied me. For you, who have lived so long on this anchored rock, my folly must be apparent. Was it folly? It was. But what else was I to do? Day after day make my perfect art only to have my father, night after night, destroy it? He would destroy me!

I left in the dark, when the ocean is like ink and the sky is black glass with thousands of air bubbles. Air bubbles, indeed. I breathed my freedom in the salty sea air. I chose stars to follow. Foolishly, I had no clear sense of my passage and had only planned my escape.

Of course, knowing what I do now about the ocean, it is a wonder I survived the first night, much less seven. It was on the eighth morning that I saw the distant sail, and, hopelessly drunk and sunburned, as well as lost, began the desperate task of rowing toward it, another folly as I'm sure you'd agree, understanding how distant the horizon is. Luckily for me, or so I thought, the ship headed in my direction and after a few more days it was close enough that I began to believe in my life again.

Alas, this ship was owned by a rich friend of my father's, a woman who had commissioned him to create a glass castle with a glass garden and glass fountain, tiny glass swans, a glass king and queen, a baby glass

princess, and glass trees with golden glass apples, all for the amusement of her granddaughter (who, it must be said, had fingers like sausages and broke half of the figurines before her next birthday). This silly woman was only too happy to let my father use her ship, she was only too pleased to pay the ship's crew, all with the air of helping my father, when, in truth, it simply amused her to be involved in such drama. She said she did it for Murano, but in truth, she did it for the story.

It wasn't until I had been rescued, and hoisted on board, that my father revealed himself to me. He spread his arms wide, all great show for the crew, hugged me and even wept, but convincing as was his act, I knew he intended to destroy me.

These are terrible choices no son should have to make, but that night, as my father slept and the ship rocked its weary way back to Murano where I would likely be hung or possibly sentenced to live with my own enemy, my father, I slit the old man's throat. Though he opened his eyes, I do not believe he saw me, but was already entering the distant kingdom.

You ladies look quite aghast. I cannot blame you. Perhaps I should have chosen my own death instead, but I was a young man, and I wanted to live. Even after everything I had gone through, I wanted life.

Alas, it was not to be. I knew there would be trouble and accusation if my father were found with his throat slit, but none at all if he just disappeared in the night, as so often happens on large ships. Many a traveler has simply fallen overboard, never to be heard from again, and my father had already displayed a lack of seafaring savvy to rival my own.

I wrapped him up in the now-bloody blanket but although he was a small man, the effect was still that of a body, so I realized I would have to bend and fold him into a rucksack. You wince, but do not worry, he was certainly dead by this time.

I will not bore you with the details of my passage, hiding and sneaking with my dismal load. Suffice it to say that it took a while for me to at last be standing shipside, and I thought then that all danger had passed.

Remember, I was already quite weakened by my days adrift, and the matter of taking care of this business with my father had only fatigued me further. Certain that I was finally at the end of my task, I grew careless. He was much heavier than he had ever appeared to be. It took all my strength to hoist the rucksack, and (to get the sad, pitiable truth over with as

quickly as possible) when I heaved that rucksack, the cord became entangled on my wrist, and yes, dear ladies, I went over with it, to the bottom of the world. There I remained until your own dear father, your husband, found me and brought me to this place, where, for the first time in my life, I feel safe, and, though I am dead, blessed.

LATER, AFTER my mother had tended the lamp while Ezekiel and I shared the kisses that left me breathless, she asked him to leave, saying that I needed my sleep. I protested, of course, but she insisted. I walked my ghost to the door, just as I think any girl would do in a similar situation, and there, for the first time, he kissed me in full view of my mother, not so passionate as those kisses that had preceded it, but effective nonetheless.

But after he was gone, even as I still blushed, my mother spoke in a grim voice, "Don't encourage him, Agatha."

"Why?" I asked, my body trembling with the impact of his affection and my mother's scorn, as though the two emotions met in me and quaked there. "What don't you like about him?"

"He's dead," she said, "there's that for a start."

"What about Daddy? He's dead too, and you've been loving him all this time."

My mother shook her head. "Agatha, it isn't the same thing. Think about what this boy told you tonight. He murdered his own father."

"I can't believe you'd use that against him. You heard what he said. He was just defending himself."

"But Agatha, it isn't what's said that is always the most telling. Don't you know that? Have I really raised you to be so gullible?"

"I am not gullible. I'm in love."

"I forbid it."

Certainly no three words, spoken by a parent, can do more to solidify love than these. It was no use arguing. What would be the point? She, this woman who had loved no one but a puddle for so long, could never understand what was going through my heart. Without more argument, I went to bed, though I slept fitfully, feeling torn from my life in every way, while my mother stayed up reading, I later surmised, from her book of

myths. In the morning I found her sitting at the kitchen table, the great volume before her. She looked up at me with dark circled eyes, then, without salutation, began reading, her voice, ominous.

"There are many kinds of ghosts. There are the ghosts that move things, slam doors and drawers, throw silverware about the house. There are the ghosts (usually of small children) that play in dark corners with spools of thread and frighten family pets. There are the weeping and wailing ghosts. There are the ghosts who know that they are dead, and those who do not. There are tree ghosts, those who spend their afterlife in a particular tree (a clue for such a resident might be bite marks on fallen fruit). There are ghosts trapped forever at the hour of their death (I saw one like this once, in an old movie theater bathroom, hanging from the ceiling). There are melting ghosts (we know about these, don't we?), usually victims of drowning. And there are breath-stealing ghosts. These, sometimes mistaken for the grosser vampire, sustain a sort of half-life by stealing breath from the living. They can be any age, but are usually teenagers and young adults, often at that selfish stage when they died. These ghosts greedily go about sucking the breath out of the living. This can be done by swallowing the lingered breath from unwashed cups, or, most effectively of all, through a kiss. Though these ghosts can often be quite seductively charming, they are some of the most dangerous. Each life has only a certain amount of breath within it and these ghosts are said to steal an infinite amount with each swallow. The effect is such that the ghost, while it never lives again, begins to do a fairly good imitation of life, while its victims (those whose breath it steals) edge ever closer to their own death."

My mother looked up at me triumphantly and I stormed out of the house, only to be confronted with the sea all around me, as desolate as my heart.

That night, when he came, knocking on the door, she did not answer it and forbade me to do so.

"It doesn't matter," I taunted, "he's a ghost. He doesn't need doors."

"No, you're wrong," she said, "he's taken so much of your breath that he's not entirely spectral. He can't move through walls any longer. He needs you, but he doesn't care about you at all, don't you get that, Agatha!"

"Agatha? Are you home? Agatha? Why don't you come? Agatha?"

I couldn't bear it. I began to weep.

"I know this is hard," my mother said, "but it must be done. Listen, his voice is already growing faint. We just have to get through this night."

"What about the lamp?" I said.

"What?"

But she knew what I meant. Her expression betrayed her. "Don't you need to check on the lamp?"

"Agatha? Have I done something wrong?"

My mother stared at the door, and then turned to me, the dark circles under her eyes giving her the look of a beaten woman. "The lamp is fine."

I spun on my heels and went into my small room, slammed the door behind me. My mother, a smart woman, was not used to thinking like a warden. She had forgotten about my window. By the time I hoisted myself down from it, Ezekiel was standing on the rocky shore, surveying the dark ocean before him. He had already lost some of his life-like luster, particularly below his knees where I could almost see through him. "Ezekiel," I said. He turned and I gasped at the change in his visage, the cavernous look of his eyes, the skeletal stretch at his jaw. Seeing my shocked expression, he nodded and spread his arms open, as if to say, yes, this is what has become of me. I ran into those open arms and embraced him, though he creaked like something made of old wood. He bent down, pressing his cold lips against mine until they were no longer cold but burning like a fire.

We spent that night together and I did not mind the shattering wind with its salt bite on my skin, and I did not care when the lamp went out and the sea roiled beneath a black sky, and I did not worry about the dead weeping on the rocky shore, or the lightness I felt as though I were floating beside my lover, and when morning came, revealing the dead all around us, I followed him into the water, I followed him to the bottom of the sea, where he turned to me and said, "What have you done? Are you stupid? Don't you realize? You're no good to me dead!"

So, sadly, like many a daughter, I learned that my mother had been right after all, and when I returned to her, dripping with saltwater and seaweed, tiny fish corpses dropping from my hair, she embraced me. Seeing my state, weeping, she kissed me on the lips, our mouths open. I

drank from her, sweet breath, until I was filled and she collapsed to the floor, my mother in her black dress, like a crushed funeral flower.

I had no time for mourning. The lamp had been out for hours. Ships had crashed and men had died. Outside the sun sparkled on the sea. People would be coming soon to find out what had happened.

I took our small boat and rowed away from there. Many hours later, I docked in a seaside town and hitchhiked to another, until eventually I was as far from my home as I could be and still be near my ocean.

I had a difficult time of it for a while. People are generally suspicious of someone with no past and little future. I lived on the street and had to beg for jobs cleaning toilets and scrubbing floors, only through time and reputation working up to my current situation, finally getting my own little apartment, small and dark, so different from when I was the lighthouse keeper's daughter and the ocean was my yard.

One day, after having passed it for months without a thought, I went into the art supply store, and bought a canvas, paint, and two paintbrushes. I paid for it with my tip money, counting it out for the clerk whose expression suggested I was placing turds in her palm instead of pennies. I went home and hammered a nail into the wall, hung the canvas on it, and began to paint. Like many a creative person I seem to have found some solace for the unfortunate happenings of my young life (and death) in art.

I live simply and virginally, never taking breath through a kiss. This is the vow I made, and I have kept it. Yes, some days I am weakened, and tempted to restore my vigor with such an easy solution, but instead I hold the empty cups to my face, I breathe in, I breathe everything, the breath of old men, breath of young, sweet breath, sour breath, breath of lipstick, breath of smoke. It is not, really, a way to live, but this is not, really, a life.

FOR SEVERAL SECONDS after Alex finished reading the remarkable account, his gaze remained transfixed on the page. Finally, he looked up, blinked in the dim coffee shop light, and closed the black binder.

Several baristas stood behind the counter busily jostling around each other with porcelain cups, teapots, bags of beans. One of them, a short girl with red and green hair that spiked around her like some otherworld halo,

stood by the sink, stacking dirty plates and cups. When she saw him watching, she smiled. It wasn't a true smile, not that it was mocking, but rather, the girl with the Christmas hair smiled like someone who had either forgotten happiness entirely, or never known it at all. In response, Alex nodded at her, and to his surprise, she came over, carrying a dirty rag and a spray bottle.

"Did you read all of it?" she said as she squirted the table beside him and began to wipe it with the dingy towel.

Alex winced at the unpleasant odor of the cleaning fluid, nodded, and then, seeing that the girl wasn't really paying any attention, said, "Yes." He glanced at the wall where the paintings were hung.

"So what'd you think?"

The girl stood there, grinning that sad grin, right next to him now with her noxious bottle and dirty rag, one hip jutted out in a way he found oddly sexual. He opened his mouth to speak, gestured toward the paintings, and then at the book before him. "I, I have to meet her," he said, tapping the book, "this is remarkable."

"But what do you think about the paintings?"

Once more he glanced at the wall where they hung. He shook his head, "No," he said, "it's this," tapping the book again.

She smiled, a true smile, cocked her head, and put out her hand, "Agatha," she said.

Alex felt like his head was spinning. He shook the girl's hand. It was unexpectedly tiny, like that of a child's, and he gripped it too tightly at first. Glancing at the counter, she pulled out a chair and sat down in front of him.

"I can only talk for a little while. Marnie is the manager today and she's on the rag or something all the time, but she's downstairs right now, checking in an order."

"You," he brushed the binder with the tip of his fingers, as if caressing something holy, "you wrote this?"

She nodded, bowed her head slightly, shrugged, and suddenly earnest, leaned across the table, elbowing his empty cup as she did. "Nobody bothers to read it. I've seen a few people pick it up but you're the first one to read the whole thing."

Alex leaned back, frowning.

She rolled her eyes, which, he noticed, were a lovely shade of lavender, lined darkly in black.

"See, I was trying to do something different. This is the whole point," she jabbed at the book, and he felt immediately protective of it, "I was trying to put a story in a place where people don't usually expect one. Don't you think we've gotten awful complacent in our society about story? Like it all the time has to go a certain way and even be only in certain places. That's what this is all about. The paintings are a foil. But you get that, don't you? Do you know," she leaned so close to him, he could smell her breath, which he thought was strangely sweet, "someone actually offered to buy the fly painting?" Her mouth dropped open, she shook her head and rolled those lovely lavender eyes. "I mean, what the fuck? Doesn't he know it sucks?"

Alex wasn't sure what to do. She seemed to be leaning near to his cup. Leaning over it, Alex realized. He opened his mouth, not having any idea what to say.

Just then another barista, the one who wore scarves all the time and had an imperious air about her, as though she didn't really belong there but was doing research or something, walked past. Agatha glanced at her. "I gotta go." She stood up. "You finished with this?" she asked, touching his cup.

Though he hadn't yet had his free refill, Alex nodded.

"It was nice talking to you," she said. "Just goes to show, doesn't it?"

Alex had no idea what she was talking about. He nodded half-heartedly, hoping comprehension would follow, but when it didn't, he raised his eyebrows at her instead.

She laughed. "I mean you don't look anything like the kind of person who would understand my stuff."

"Well, you don't look much like Agatha," he said.

"But I am Agatha," she murmured as she turned away from him, picking up an empty cup and saucer from a nearby table.

Alex watched her walk to the tiny sink at the end of the counter. She set the cups and saucers down. She rinsed the saucers and placed them in the gray bucket they used for carrying dirty dishes to the back. She reached for a cup, and then looked at him.

He quickly looked down at the black binder, picked it up, pushed his

chair in, and headed toward the front of the shop. He stopped to look at the paintings. They were fine, boring, but fine little paintings that had no connection to what he'd read. He didn't linger over them for long. He was almost to the door when she was beside him, saying, "I'll take that." He couldn't even fake innocence. He shrugged and handed her the binder.

"I'm flattered, really," she said. But she didn't try to continue the conversation. She set the book down on the table beneath the painting of the avocado. He watched her pick up an empty cup and bring it toward her face, breathing in the lingered breath that remained. She looked up suddenly, caught him watching, frowned, and turned away.

Alex understood. She wasn't what he'd been expecting either. But when love arrives it doesn't always appear as expected. He couldn't just ignore it. He couldn't pretend it hadn't happened. He walked out of the coffee shop into the afternoon sunshine.

Of course, there were problems, her not being alive for one. But Alex was not a man of prejudice.

He was patient besides. He stood in the art supply store for hours, pretending particular interest in the anatomical hinged figurines of sexless men and women in the front window, before she walked past, her hair glowing like a forest fire.

"Agatha," he called.

She turned, frowned, and continued walking. He had to take little running steps to catch up. "Hi," he said. He saw that she was biting her lower lip. "You just getting off work?"

She stopped walking right in front of the bank, which was closed by then, and squinted up at him.

"Alex," he said. "I was talking to you today at the coffee shop."

"I know who you are."

Her tone was angry. He couldn't understand it. Had he insulted her somehow?

"I don't have Alzheimer's. I remember you."

He nodded. This was harder than he had expected.

"What do you want?" she said.

Her tone was really downright hostile. He shrugged. "I just thought we could, you know, talk."

She shook her head. "Listen, I'm happy that you liked my story."

"I did," he said, nodding, "it was great."

"But what would we talk about? You and me?"

Alex shifted beneath her lavender gaze. He licked his lips. She wasn't even looking at him, but glancing around him and across the street. "I don't care if it does mean I'll die sooner," he said. "I want to give you a kiss."

Her mouth dropped open.

"Is something wrong?"

She turned and ran. She wore one red sneaker and one green. They matched her hair.

As Alex walked back to his car, parked in front of the coffee shop, he tried to talk himself into not feeling so bad about the way things went. He hadn't always been like this. He used to be able to talk to people. Even women. Okay, he had never been suave, he knew that, but he'd been a regular guy. Certainly no one had ever run away from him before. But after Tessie died, people changed. Of course, this made sense, initially. He was in mourning, even if he didn't cry (something the doctor told him not to worry about because one day, probably when he least expected it, the tears would fall). He was obviously in pain. People were very nice. They talked to him in hushed tones. Touched him, gently. Even men tapped him with their fingertips. All this gentle touching had been augmented by vigorous hugs. People either touched him as if he would break, or hugged him as if he had already broken and only the vigor of the embrace kept him intact.

For the longest time there had been all this activity around him. People called, sent chatty e-mails, even handwritten letters, cards with flowers on them and prayers. People brought over casseroles, and bread, Jell-O with fruit in it. (Nobody brought chocolate chip cookies, which he might have actually eaten.)

To Alex's surprise, once Tessie had died, it felt as though a great weight had been lifted from him, but instead of appreciating the feeling, the freedom of being lightened of the burden of his wife's dying body, he felt in danger of floating away or disappearing. Could it be possible, he wondered, that Tessie's body, even when she was mostly bones and barely breath, was all that kept him real? Was it possible that he would have to live like this, held to life by some strange force but never a part of it again?

These questions led Alex to the brief period where he'd experimented with becoming a Hare Krishna, shaved his head, dressed in orange robes, and took up dancing in the park. Alex wasn't sure but he thought that was when people started treating him as if he were strange, and even after he grew his hair out and started wearing regular clothes again, people continued to treat him strangely.

And, Alex had to admit, as he inserted his key into the lock of his car, he'd forgotten how to behave. How to be normal, he guessed.

You just don't go read something somebody wrote and decide you love her, he scolded himself as he eased into traffic. You don't just go falling in love with breath-stealing ghosts. People don't do that.

Alex did not go to the coffee shop the next day, or the day after that, but it was the only coffee shop in town, and had the best coffee in the state. They roasted the beans right there. Freshness like that can't be faked.

It was awkward for him to see her behind the counter, over by the dirty cups, of course. But when she looked up at him, he attempted a kind smile, then looked away.

He wasn't there to bother her. He ordered French Roast in a cup to go, even though he hated to drink out of paper, paid for it, dropped the change into the tip jar, and left without any further interaction with her.

He walked to the park, where he sat on a bench and watched a woman with two small boys feed white bread to the ducks. This was illegal because the ducks would eat all the bread offered to them, they had no sense of appetite, or being full, and they would eat until their stomachs exploded. Or something like that. Alex couldn't exactly remember. He was pretty sure it killed them. But Alex couldn't decide what to do. Should he go tell that lady and those two little boys that they were killing the ducks? How would that make them feel, especially as they were now triumphantly shaking out the empty bag, the ducks crowded around them, one of the boys squealing with delight? Maybe he should just tell her, quietly. But she looked so happy. Maybe she'd been having a hard time of it. He saw those mothers on *Oprah*, saying what a hard job it was, and maybe she'd had that kind of morning, even screaming at the kids, and then she got this idea, to take them to the park and feed the ducks and now she felt good about what she'd done and maybe she was thinking that she wasn't such a bad mom after all, and if Alex told her she was killing the

ducks, would it stop the ducks from dying or just stop her from feeling happiness? Alex sighed. He couldn't decide what to do. The ducks were happy, the lady was happy, and one of the boys was happy. The other one looked sort of terrified. She picked him up and they walked away together, she, carrying the boy who waved the empty bag like a balloon, the other one skipping after them, a few ducks hobbling behind.

For three days Alex ordered his coffee to go and drank it in the park. On the fourth day, Agatha wasn't anywhere that he could see and he surmised that it was her day off so he sat at his favorite table in the back. But on the fifth day, even though he didn't see her again, and it made sense that she'd have two days off in a row, he ordered his coffee to go and took it to the park. He'd grown to like sitting on the bench watching strolling park visitors, the running children, the dangerously fat ducks.

He had no idea she would be there and he felt himself blush when he saw her coming down the path that passed right in front of him. He stared deeply into his cup and fought the compulsion to run. He couldn't help it, though. Just as the toes of her red and green sneakers came into view he looked up. I'm not going to hurt you, he thought, and then, he smiled, that false smile he'd been practicing on her and, incredibly, she smiled back! Also, falsely, he assumed, but he couldn't blame her for that.

She looked down the path and he followed her gaze, seeing that, though the path around the duck pond was lined with benches every fifty feet or so, all of them were taken. She sighed. "Mind if I sit here?"

He scooted over and she sat down, slowly. He glanced at her profile. She looked worn out, he decided. Her lavender eye flickered toward him, and he looked into his cup again. It made sense that she would be tired, he thought, if she'd been off work for two days, she'd also been going that long without stealing breath from cups. "Want some?" he said, offering his.

She looked startled, pleased, and then, falsely unconcerned. She peered over the edge of his cup, shrugged, and said, "Okay, yeah, sure."

He handed it to her and politely watched the ducks so she could have some semblance of privacy with it. After a while she said thanks and handed it back to him. He nodded and stole a look at her profile again. It pleased him that her color already looked better. His breath had done that!

"Sorry about the other day," she said, "I was just...."

They waited together but she didn't finish the sentence.

"It's okay," he said, "I know I'm weird."

"No, you're, well — " she smiled, glanced at him, shrugged. "It isn't that. I like weird people. I'm weird. But, I mean, I'm not dead, okay? You kind of freaked me out with that."

He nodded. "Would you like to go out with me sometime?" Inwardly, he groaned. He couldn't believe he just said that.

"Listen, Alex?"

He nodded. Stop nodding, he told himself. Stop acting like a bobblehead.

"Why don't you tell me a little about yourself?"

So he told her. How he'd been coming to the park lately, watching people overfeed the ducks, wondering if he should tell them what they were doing but they all looked so happy doing it, and the ducks looked happy too, and he wasn't sure anyway, what if he was wrong, what if he told everyone to stop feeding bread to the ducks and it turned out it did them no harm and how would he know? Would they explode like balloons, or would it be more like how it had been when his wife died, a slow painful death, eating her away inside, and how he used to come here, when he was a monk, well, not really a monk, he'd never gotten ordained or anything, but he'd been trying the idea on for a while and how he used to sing and spin in circles and how it felt a lot like what he'd remembered of happiness but he could never be sure because a remembered emotion is like a remembered taste, it's never really there. And then, one day, a real monk came and watched him spinning in circles and singing nonsense, and he just stood and watched Alex, which made him self-conscious because he didn't really know what he was doing, and the monk started laughing, which made Alex stop and the monk said, "Why'd you stop?" And Alex said, "I don't know what I'm doing." And the monk nodded, as if this was a very wise thing to say and this, just this monk with his round bald head and wire-rimmed spectacles, in his simple orange robe (not at all like the orange-dyed sheet Alex was wearing) nodding when Alex said, "I don't know what I'm doing," made Alex cry and he and the monk sat down under that tree, and the monk (whose name was Ron) told him about Kali, the goddess who is both womb and grave. Alex felt like it was the first thing anyone had said to him that made sense since Tessie died and after that he stopped coming to the park, until just recently, and let his hair grow out again and stopped wearing his robe. Before she'd died, he'd been

one of the lucky ones, or so he'd thought, because he made a small fortune in a dot com, and actually got out of it before it all went belly up while so many people he knew lost everything but then Tessie came home from her doctor's appointment, not pregnant, but with cancer, and he realized he wasn't lucky at all. They met in high school and were together until she died, at home, practically blind by that time and she made him promise he wouldn't just give up on life. So he began living this sort of half-life, but he wasn't unhappy or depressed, he didn't want her to think that, he just wasn't sure. "I sort of lost confidence in life," he said. "It's like I don't believe in it anymore. Not like suicide, but I mean, like the whole thing, all of it isn't real somehow. Sometimes I feel like it's all a dream, or a long nightmare that I can never wake up from. It's made me odd, I guess."

She bit her lower lip, glanced longingly at his cup.

"Here," Alex said, "I'm done anyway."

She took it and lifted it toward her face, breathing in, he was sure of it, and only after she was finished, drinking the coffee. They sat like that in silence for a while and then they just started talking about everything, just as Alex had hoped they would. She told him how she had grown up living near the ocean, and her father had died young, and then her mother had too, and she had a boyfriend, her first love, who broke her heart, but the story she wrote was just a story, a story about her life, her dream life, the way she felt inside, like he did, as though somehow life was a dream. Even though everyone thought she was a painter (because he was the only one who read it, he was the only one who got it), she was a writer, not a painter, and stories seemed more real to her than life. At a certain point he offered to take the empty cup and throw it in the trash but she said she liked to peel off the wax, and then began doing so. Alex politely ignored the divergent ways she found to continue drinking his breath. He didn't want to embarrass her.

They finally stood up and stretched, walked through the park together and grew quiet, with the awkwardness of new friends. "You want a ride?" he said, pointing at his car.

She declined, which was a disappointment to Alex but he determined not to let it ruin his good mood. He was willing to leave it at that, to accept what had happened between them that afternoon as a moment of grace to be treasured and expect nothing more from it, when she said, "What are

you doing next Tuesday?" They made a date, well, not a date, Alex reminded himself, an arrangement, to meet the following Tuesday in the park, which they did, and there followed many wonderful Tuesdays. They did not kiss. They were friends. Of course Alex still loved her. He loved her more. But he didn't bother her with all that and it was in the spirit of friendship that he suggested (after weeks of Tuesdays in the park) that the following Tuesday she come for dinner, "nothing fancy," he promised when he saw the slight hesitation on her face.

But when she said yes, he couldn't help it; he started making big plans for the night.

Naturally, things were awkward when she arrived. He offered to take her sweater, a lumpy looking thing in wild shades of orange, lime green, and purple. He should have just let her throw it across the couch, that would have been the casual non-datelike thing to do, but she handed it to him and then, wiping her hand through her hair, which, by candlelight looked like bloody grass, cased his place with those lavender eyes, deeply shadowed as though she hadn't slept for weeks.

He could see she was freaked out by the candles. He hadn't gone crazy or anything. They were just a couple of small candles, not even purchased from the store in the mall, but bought at the grocery store, unscented. "I like candles," he said, sounding defensive even to his own ears.

She smirked, as if she didn't believe him, and then spun away on the toes of her red sneaker and her green one, and plopped down on the couch. She looked absolutely exhausted. This was not a complete surprise to Alex. It had been a part of his plan, actually, but he felt bad for her just the same.

He kept dinner simple, lasagna, a green salad, chocolate cake for dessert. They didn't eat in the dining room. That would have been too formal. Instead they ate in the living room, she sitting on the couch, and he on the floor, their plates on the coffee table, watching a DVD of *I Love Lucy* episodes, a mutual like they had discovered. (Though her description of watching *I Love Lucy* reruns as a child did not gel with his picture of her in the crooked keeper's house, offering tea to melting ghosts, he didn't linger over the inconsistency.) Alex offered her plenty to drink but he wouldn't let her come into the kitchen, or get anywhere near his cup. He felt bad about this, horrible, in fact, but he tried to stay focused on the bigger picture.

After picking at her cake for a while, Agatha set the plate down, leaned back into the gray throw pillows, and closed her eyes.

Alex watched her. He didn't think about anything, he just watched her. Then he got up very quietly so as not to disturb her and went into the kitchen where he, carefully, quietly opened the drawer in which he had stored the supplies. Coming up from behind, eyeing her red and green hair, he moved quickly. She turned toward him, cursing loudly, her eyes wide and frightened, as he pressed her head to her knees, pulled her arms behind her back (to the accompaniment of a sickening crack, and her scream) pressed the wrists together and wrapped them with the rope. She struggled in spite of her weakened state, her legs flailing, kicking the coffee table. The plate with the chocolate cake flew off it and landed on the beige rug and her screams escalated into a horrible noise, unlike anything Alex had ever heard before. Luckily, Alex was prepared with the duct tape, which he slapped across her mouth. By that time he was rather exhausted himself. But she stood up and began to run, awkwardly, across the room. It broke his heart to see her this way. He grabbed her from behind. She kicked and squirmed but she was quite a small person and it was easy for him to get her legs tied.

"Is that too tight?" he asked.

She looked at him with wide eyes. As if he were the ghost.

"I don't want you to be uncomfortable."

She shook her head. Tried to speak, but only produced muffled sounds.

"I can take that off," he said, pointing at the duct tape. "But you have to promise me you won't scream. If you scream, I'll just put it on, and I won't take it off again. Though, you should know, ever since Tessie died I have these vivid dreams and nightmares, and I wake up screaming a lot. None of my neighbors has ever done anything about it. Nobody's called the police to report it, and nobody has even asked me if there's a problem. That's how it is amongst the living. Okay?"

She nodded.

He picked at the edge of the tape with his fingertips and when he got a good hold of it, he pulled fast. It made a loud ripping sound. She grunted and gasped, tears falling down her cheeks as she licked her lips.

"I'm really sorry about this," Alex said. "I just couldn't think of another way."

She began to curse, a string of expletives quickly swallowed by her weeping, until finally she managed to ask, "Alex, what are you doing?"

He sighed. "I know it's true, okay? I see the way you are, how tired you get and I know why. I know that you're a breath-stealer. I want you to understand that I know that about you, and I love you and you don't have to keep pretending with me, okay?"

She looked around the room, as if trying to find something to focus on. "Listen, Alex," she said, "Listen to me. I get tired all the time 'cause I'm sick. I didn't want to tell you, after what you told me about your wife. I thought it would be too upsetting for you. That's it. That's why I get tired all the time."

"No," he said, softly, "you're a ghost."

"I am not dead," she said, shaking her head so hard that her tears splashed his face. "I am not dead," she said over and over again, louder and louder until Alex felt forced to tape her mouth shut once more.

"I know you're afraid. Love can be frightening. Do you think I'm not scared? Of course I'm scared. Look what happened with Tessie. I know you're scared too. You're worried I'll turn out to be like Ezekiel, but I'm not like him, okay? I'm not going to hurt you. And I even finally figured out that you're scared 'cause of what happened with your mom. Of course you are. But you have to understand. That's a risk I'm willing to take. Maybe we'll have one night together or only one hour, or a minute. I don't know. I have good genes though. My parents, both of them, are still alive, okay? Even my grandmother only died a few years ago. There's a good chance I have a lot, and I mean a lot, of breath in me. But if I don't, don't you see, I'd rather spend a short time with you, than no time at all?"

He couldn't bear it, he couldn't bear the way she looked at him as if he were a monster when he carried her to the couch. "Are you cold?"

She just stared at him.

"Do you want to watch more *I Love Lucy*? Or a movie?"

She wouldn't respond. She could be so stubborn.

He decided on *Annie Hall*. "Do you like Woody Allen?" She just stared at him, her eyes filled with accusation. "It's a love story," he said, turning away from her to insert the DVD. He turned it on for her, then placed the remote control in her lap, which he realized was a stupid thing to do, since her hands were still tied behind her back, and he was fairly

certain that, had her mouth not been taped shut, she'd be giving him that slack-jawed look of hers. She wasn't making any of this very easy. He picked the dish up off the floor, and the silverware, bringing them into the kitchen, where he washed them and the pots and pans, put aluminum foil on the leftover lasagna and put it into the refrigerator. After he finished sweeping the floor, he sat and watched the movie with her. He forgot about the sad ending. He always thought of it as a romantic comedy, never remembering the sad end. He turned off the TV and said, "I think it's late enough now. I think we'll be all right." She looked at him quizzically.

First Alex went out to his car and popped the trunk, then he went back inside where he found poor Agatha squirming across the floor. Trying to escape, apparently. He walked past her, got the throw blanket from the couch and laid it on the floor beside her, rolled her into it even as she squirmed and bucked. "Agatha, just try to relax," he said, but she didn't. Stubborn, stubborn, she could be so stubborn.

He threw her over his shoulder. He was not accustomed to carrying much weight and immediately felt the stress, all the way down his back to his knees. He shut the apartment door behind him and didn't worry about locking it. He lived in a safe neighborhood.

When they got to the car, he put her into the trunk, only then taking the blanket away from her beautiful face. "Don't worry, it won't be long," he said as he closed the hood.

He looked through his CDs, trying to choose something she would like, just in case the sound carried into the trunk, but he couldn't figure out what would be appropriate so he finally decided just to drive in silence.

It took about twenty minutes to get to the beach; it was late, and there was little traffic. Still, the ride gave him an opportunity to reflect on what he was doing. By the time he pulled up next to the pier, he had reassured himself that it was the right thing to do, even though it looked like the wrong thing.

He'd made a good choice, deciding on this place. He and Tessie used to park here, and he was amazed that it had apparently remained undiscovered by others seeking dark escape.

When he got out of the car he took a deep breath of the salt air and stood, for a moment, staring at the black waves, listening to their crash and murmur. Then he went around to the back and opened up the trunk.

He looked over his shoulder, just to be sure. If someone were to discover him like this, his actions would be misinterpreted. The coast was clear, however. He wanted to carry Agatha in his arms, like a bride. Every time he had pictured it, he had seen it that way, but she was struggling again so he had to throw her over his shoulder where she continued to struggle. Well, she was stubborn, but he was too, that was part of the beauty of it, really. But it made it difficult to walk, and it was windier on the pier, also wet. All in all it was a precarious, unpleasant journey to the end.

He had prepared a little speech but she struggled against him so hard, like a hooked fish, that all he could manage to say was, "I love you," barely focusing on the wild expression in her face, the wild eyes, before he threw her in and she sank, and then bobbed up like a cork, only her head above the black waves, those eyes of hers, locked on his, and they remained that way, as he turned away from the edge of the pier and walked down the long plank, feeling lighter, but not in a good way. He felt those eyes, watching him, in the car as he flipped restlessly from station to station, those eyes, watching him, when he returned home, and saw the clutter of their night together, the burned-down candles, the covers to the *I Love Lucy* and *Annie Hall* DVDs on the floor, her crazy sweater on the dining room table, those eyes, watching him, and suddenly Alex was cold, so cold his teeth were chattering and he was shivering but sweating besides. The black water rolled over those eyes and closed them and he ran to the bathroom and only just made it in time, throwing up everything he'd eaten, collapsing to the floor, weeping, *What have I done? What was I thinking?*

He would have stayed there like that, he determined, until they came for him and carted him away, but after a while he became aware of the foul taste in his mouth. He stood up, rinsed it out, brushed his teeth and tongue, changed out of his clothes, and went to bed, where, after a good deal more crying, and trying to figure out exactly what had happened to his mind, he was amazed to find himself falling into a deep darkness like the water, from which, he expected, he would never rise.

But then he was lying there, with his eyes closed, somewhere between sleep and waking, and he realized he'd been like this for some time. Though he was fairly certain he had fallen asleep, something had woken him. In this half state, he'd been listening to the sound he finally recognized as dripping water. He hated it when he didn't turn the faucet

tight. He tried to ignore it, but the dripping persisted. So confused was he that he even thought he felt a splash on his hand and another on his forehead. He opened one eye, then the other.

She stood there, dripping wet, her hair plastered darkly around her face, her eyes smudged black. "I found a sharp rock at the bottom of the world," she said and she raised her arms. He thought she was going to strike him, but instead she showed him the cut rope dangling there.

He nodded. He could not speak.

She cocked her head, smiled, and said, "Okay, you were right. You were right about everything. Got any room in there?"

He nodded. She peeled off the wet T-shirt and let it drop to the floor, revealing her small breasts white as the moon, unbuttoned and unzipped her jeans, wiggling seductively out of the tight wet fabric, taking her panties off at the same time. He saw when she lifted her feet that the rope was no longer around them and she was already transparent below the knees. When she pulled back the covers he smelled the odd odor of saltwater and mud, as if she were both fresh and loamy. He scooted over, but only far enough that when she eased in beside him, he could hold her, wrap her wet cold skin in his arms, knowing that he was offering her everything, everything he had to give, and that she had come to take it.

"You took a big risk back there," she said.

He nodded.

She pressed her lips against his and he felt himself growing lighter, as if all his life he'd been weighed down by this extra breath, and her lips were cold but they grew warmer and warmer and the heat between them created a steam until she burned him and still, they kissed, all the while Alex thinking, I love you, I love you, I love you, until, finally, he could think it no more, his head was as light as his body, lying beside her, hot flesh to hot flesh, the cinder of his mind could no longer make sense of it, and he hoped, as he fell into a black place like no other he'd ever been in before, that this was really happening, that she was really here, and the suffering he'd felt for so long was finally over.



F&SF COMPETITION #71

"It was a dark and ion-stormy night..."

IT WAS A dark and stormy competition. Some writers wrote truly terrible prose, others wrote clever stuff that really wasn't "bad" enough. So how to judge such a competition? The same way I always do: pick the ones that make me laugh the hardest.

This competition was not without flaws, and I don't just mean the prose: instead of the usual fifty words, I increased the word count to one hundred—then promptly forgot about it until a few writers delicately reminded me. It's a mistake I won't repeat. I found the shorter entries punchier, and more entertaining.

WINNERS

FIRST PLACE:

"It was a dark and ion-stormy night, as you know, Bob, and as you also know ion-storms are especially dangerous in the orbit of Tau Deltoid IV."

"I do know it, Brent, and I would also add that proton-showers can have a nasty effect on a ship's trichometers anywhere in the Tau Deltoid system."

"God, how I hate you!" simmered Brent, who resented any mention of shipboard trichometers because of their high-infinite bulbulousness.

"Not as much as I hate myself," beamed Bob plangently.

—James M. Pfundstein
Bowling Green, OH

SECOND PLACE

It was a dark and ion-stormy night in the ruined city. Corythra roused from her bed of worthless currency in the vault of the abandoned bank; she sidled forth into the storm, enjoying the salty tang of negative ions until she achieved enough voltaic lubricity to attract a mate.

—Lyman Caswell
Des Moines, IA

RUNNERS UP:

It was a dark and ion-stormy night full of hard cosmic radiation that blasted down on Tim Beefman's sleek and slender silver-sided space ship, *Beefman's Pride*. Booster rockets on full, Tim's manly muscled hands caressed the ship's controls like the firm curves of a woman. Any woman. Just not his girlfriend.

—Steve Forstner
Chase, MI

It was a dark and ion-stormy night in New York City. The entity remained locked in this lead lined vault in this once cancer clinic. Madame Curie herself had visited this upper Fifth Avenue basement with its cache of radium. It was her contaminated body that had given it "life." Now all it needed was freedom.

—F. X. Gallagher
Berne, NY

It was a dark and ion-stormy night. The aurora borealis hung in the southern sky like a curtain being vacuumed by a giant. The moon rose in the west, while the sun hung motionless in the sky like a spicy Martian burrito stuck to the ceiling.

—Daniel J. Maines
Clifton Spring, NY

DISHONORABLE MENTIONS:

It was a dark and ion-stormy night on Retal 77, and the sun was shining through the fur of the mutant bunnies, who were dancing through the molecules.

—Peter T. Mayhew
Chevy Chase, MD

It was a dark and ion-stormy night; dense fog obscured the silv'ry moon. I'd made it to the final table of the Texas Hold 'Em Tournament at Surreptitia. The dealer shuffled the cards, stirring the air. Libling shouted, "Don't let the candles go out!" I'd eaten a bad hamburger, I didn't know what time it was, but with pure vision I knew Pete Beagle held two hearts. I said as much. He replied, "Think so?" Yeah, I thought, I'll be the last man standing, the new deity. I felt born-again as I went all in. Alas, the pitiless stars...

—Mariam Kirby
Mincola, TX

F&SF COMPETITION #72

Haunted by the Ghostwriter:

Genre authors have tried their hand at ghostwriting. Alas, they couldn't always hide their true styles. Give an example of a paragraph written by a famous genre author that was exorcised. Keep it to fifty words or less of amusing prose.

Example: "Behold," said Mr. MacGregor. "My electron-destructogun outclasses your carrot-based shielding!"
(E. E. "Doc" Smith ghostwrites for Beatrix Potter)

RULES: Send entries to Competition Editor, *F&SF*, 240 West 73rd St. #1201, New York, NY 10023-2794, or e-mail entries to carol@cybrid.net. Be sure to include your contact information. Entries must be received by May 15, 2006. Judges are the editors of *F&SF*, and their decision is final. All entries become the property of *F&SF*.

PRIZES: First prize will receive a signed U.S. hc edition of *The Separation* by Christopher Priest (published by Old Earth Books). Second prize will receive advance reading copies of three forthcoming novels. Any runners-up will each receive one-year subscriptions to *F&SF*. Results of Competition 72 will appear in the Oct/Nov 2006 issue.

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CURIOSITIES

LAZY BEAR LANE, BY THORNE SMITH (1931)

THORNE Smith's reputation rests on such mildly naughty 1920s and 1930s novels as *Topper* and *The Night Life of the Gods*. His typical protagonists were conventional folks whose dull lives were transformed by supernatural intervention into a riot of cheerful inebriation, discreet (offstage) sex, and the confounding of cops and judges, with dialogue that wandered away whenever a point threatened to come into sight.

Smith's only children's novel, *Lazy Bear Lane*, hews in part to the pattern, but has to substitute food for the adult pleasures of gin and canoodling. Elderly couple Peter and Mary are glumly starving in their dull little house, reduced to eating a stew made out of cuttings from a seed catalog, when a bear knocks on the door. Lazy Bear, who modestly admits to being magic, turns them back to the small children they once were and sends them out to find adventure. They are soon

joined on their travels by Mr. Budge (whose own sole magical attribute is the much-appreciated one of a refilling picnic basket) and four abandoned circus performers: a female equestrian, a sad clown, and two timid talking lions.

Their travels take them to a bleak Christmas scene in the slums of Winter Town, where it is always winter; to an outdoor church service where the organist also teaches hunter avoidance classes to local deer; and to a flying ship crewed by penguins. Constant throughout are descriptions of meals, humorous poetry recited by Peter, and typically Smithian wandering/pun-filled conversations from all hands. As with his adult novels, the humor is tinged with melancholy never far below the surface: when someone says that the sad clown, Mr. Bingle, is "happy in his own strange way," his reply is that "I am...I'd much rather be sad than not funny." ♪

—Dennis Lien

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